



Homer's Odyssey

A Fearless Feline Tale, or How I
Learned About Love and Life with
a Blind Wonder Cat

Gwen Cooper

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A FEARLESS FELINE TALE,

or

HOW I LEARNED ABOUT LOVE AND
LIFE WITH A BLIND WONDER CAT

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For Laurence, always

**All strangers and beggars are from Zeus.
And a gift, though small, is precious.**

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

FOREWORD

BY PATRICIA KHULY, VMD

WHEN I FIRST SAW THE KITTEN, HE WAS A MINUSCULE BIT OF BLACK FUZZ cupped in a young woman's outstretched hands. No different from any other kitten, it would seem—that is, until he raised his head and emitted an impressive yowl for a creature only four inches in length, tip-to-tail.

Tiny though he was, he turned to the sound of my voice. That's when I saw his eyes. This two-week-old foundling was clearly suffering from a severe infection that would surely take his sight, if not his life.

The well-meaning couple who'd found him practically begged me to euthanize him immediately. Despite their entreaties, I performed a careful physical examination as the kitten struggled, legs flailing, and mewled vigorously on the stainless-steel exam table. Finally, I announced that the kitten seemed perfectly healthy—if you discounted his ocular condition. Would they consider adopting him if I was able to treat his infection?

For a long list of reasons, the couple could not provide a home for such a young kitten. They worked. They had a dog. They didn't have the money. And what were the chances that he would ever be able to see again, anyway?

Oh ... none. No chance. I explained that I intended to surgically remove his eyes to save his life.

I'm pretty sure that's when I lost them. Shaking their heads in disbelief, they elected to sign him over to my care. His pitiable cries probably pushed their decision along the path of rejection—they were convinced he was suffering terrible pain.

After his owners agreed to give him up, he was mine to treat as seemed in his best interests. I still had my doubts, but they were laid to rest once the source of his immediate discomfort was revealed: hunger. A small bowl of cat food mashed with milk replacer stifled his cries. He was peacefully asleep within minutes, sealing my decision to treat his eyes, never mind the blindness to come.

After all, I thought, this kitten had never had the benefit of sight. Unlike human babies, cats are born with their eyes sealed to the world for ten to thirteen days.

This two-weeker's relatively long-standing infection had almost certainly prevented any emerging vision. Once treated, he'd be blind without ever missing the sensory capacity for sight. Like many animals, kittens are capable of rerouting their neurologic faculties for successful survival through a process called individual environmental adaptation—my fancy term for “I refuse to put him to sleep.” How could I renege on my duty to alleviate suffering if I could maintain a life worth living?

Ask any young, idealistic vets, and they'll likely confess to the same kind of sin I committed the day this blind kitten came my way. If the animal is afflicted yet healable—and even remotely adoptable—*It's meant to be*, we reason. They're the ones who always strum our heartstrings with their astonishing survival skills and irresistible ugly-duckling potential.

I knew there was no way I could keep a blind kitten in my toddler-, allergy-, and big-dog-inhabited household. Yet I certainly couldn't let a vigorous kitten die over a pesky little issue like homelessness. *Someone in my circle of friends and family will doubtless find him as appealing as I do*, I rationalized. He'd find a home if I could just find someone with the requisite mix of eccentricity and empathy to take on a “special-needs” case.

What followed were a couple of weeks of rejection after rejection. I enlisted my family, an animal-loving clan who dutifully spread the word of the blind kitten in need of a safe home. I placed ads and sought out vet school friends with a penchant for the pitiful. None of it yielded any potential takers.

By this time I'd dispensed with all my rationalizing and self-flagellation. The kitten had bounded back to life after surgery—so much so that my staff and I were irretrievably in love with him. There were days I really couldn't bear the thought of parting with him.

How could I help but be smitten with his scraggly little blackness, his tiny sunken sockets, his insatiable appetite for feedings, pettings, cuddlings, and play sessions? Yes, he even romped like a normal kitten, despite his eyelessness. In short, he was eminently lovable ... at least by all standards except the one with which most humans preoccupied themselves: his appearance.

Finally, one young woman with two cats of her own who were treated at my practice promised to have a look. But when I finally handed my dark furball over to this prospective owner, I felt a twinge of trepidation. Would she look at him

with disgust the way others had? Demur due to an inability to take on such a strange and disabled thing?

Instead, she whispered gently to him. She picked him up and held him. He purred in her arms. To my surprise and utter relief, she earned my eternal gratitude when she said, “I’m taking him home.”

Homer was the first “hopeless” case I’d taken on in my then-short career. Though I’ve had many more since, his was the seminal experience, one that ultimately paved the way for so many others.

Homer’s “odyssey” will doubtless mean different things to different people. But for me, Homer will always be an intensely personal reminder of what veterinary medicine can pull off when it’s infused with the idealism of youth. He’ll always remind me that there’s nothing a partnership between a veterinarian, a loving owner, and one fighting patient can’t achieve.

Homer’s story is one for all of us to live by.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PROLOGUE • The Cat Who Lived

**Tell me, O Muse, of that ingenious hero who traveled
far and wide ...**

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

THE ROUTINE WHEN I GET HOME AT THE END OF THE DAY IS ALWAYS THE same.

The *ding!* of the elevator is the first cue to sensitive ears that my appearance is imminent, and by the time my key hits the lock I hear the soft press of paws on the other side of the door. I've found that I tend to open all doors—even those in other people's homes—with enough caution to prevent any furry miscreants from tumbling outside. Rather than seeking the floor, however, it's only a matter of seconds before those paws have found their way from the door to the front of my legs, and a tiny black cat makes his best effort to shimmy his way up my body as if I were a tree trunk.

To prevent injury to either my clothes or the skin beneath—his claws are small, but highly effective—I squat down with a cheerful “Hi, Homer-Bear!” (A nickname given when he was a kitten on account of his glossy black fur, like a grizzly bear's coat.) Homer takes this as his cue to jump onto my knees, placing his front paws on my shoulders and rubbing his nose against mine with much loud purring and a series of short, clipped *mews* that sound uncannily like the yips of a puppy. “Hey, little guy,” I say, scratching him behind his ears. This sends Homer into veritable convulsions of delight, and—no longer content with mere nose-to-nose contact—he presses his entire face to my forehead, sliding it down to my cheek and back up again.

Squatting in the high heels I typically wear (I'm only five foot one, but I refuse to live life as a short person) is even more painful than it sounds, so I pick Homer up and deposit him back on the ground, rising to my feet and finally entering the apartment I share with my husband, Laurence. Keys, coat, and bags are quickly stowed away. When you live with three cats, you learn that the best way to prevent fur accumulation on the clothes you wear publicly is to change into knock-around-the-house garb immediately upon arrival. So from there I head to the bedroom and make a quick change.

A fuzzy shadow trails my steps through the apartment, leaping to the tops of any and all furniture along the way. Homer jumps effortlessly from floor to chair, from chair to dining room table, then back to the floor again, like Q*bert on speed. As I make my way from the living/dining area to the hallway, Homer's up on top of a side table, then hurls himself recklessly to the third shelf of the bookcase diagonally across the hall, perching for a precarious moment until I've passed. Then he's down on the ground once more, zipping along ahead of me and occasionally, in his enthusiasm, running smack into one of my other two cats until he reaches the doorway to the bedroom. Stopping at precisely the same point each time, he pauses for an infinitesimal moment, then cuts a hard left through the bedroom door, as if he were drawing a large capital *L*. He jumps to the top of the bed, where he knows I'll sit to remove my shoes, and crawls into my lap for another round of purring and face rubbing.

This routine is the same from day to day. What changes is the closer survey of the apartment I take once I've changed clothes. Homer is a creature of many and varied hobbies, and it's hard to know from one week to the next what new projects he's decided to immerse himself in.

For a while, his goal seemed to be setting the world record for number of items pushed from the top of a coffee table in a single day. Laurence and I are both writers, so we have the usual writers' effluvia—pens, pads, and scraps of paper with notes we've taken—scattered among the magazines, paperbacks, tissue boxes, ticket stubs, sunglasses, matchbooks, breath mints, remote controls, and take-out menus. One day we came home to find our coffee table swept entirely clean—books, pens, remote controls, and all, spattered across the floor like a Jackson Pollock canvas. We restored the items to their rightful place (not without a certain amount of shamefaced tidying up), but this pattern continued for several weeks. We weren't sure which of the cats was our phantom housekeeper until the night I came home and caught Homer in the very act, quivering with pride at his accomplishment and wholly unrepentant.

"Maybe he's objecting to the clutter," I suggested to Laurence. "It's probably disconcerting for him to have everything in a different place whenever he jumps up onto the table."

Laurence isn't as prone as I am to examining the hidden motivations of our pets. "I think the cat just likes pushing things off the coffee table" was his reply.

We've also learned to tie closed the sliding closet doors in our home. It's apparently easier than one would think for a small cat to hoist the full weight of his body up a hanging pair of jeans (denim being a nice, sturdy material that's well suited to climbing), then propel himself onto a top shelf where boxes of old photos, wrapped birthday and holiday gifts (which make a delightful crinkling-paper sound when they're clawed open), and comfy piles of soft clothes make their homes. Garbage cans—no matter how tall—can be leapt into and toppled onto their sides. Scratching posts made of coiled rope can be completely unraveled, given enough persistence. Bookcases can be scaled and hardcovers hurled from their highest shelves. The same goes for records, CDs, and DVDs stacked in an entertainment center. With enough imagination, the acts of general mischief and minor destruction that one small cat can discover over the course of an average workday are endless. If there's one valuable life lesson I've learned from Homer, in fact, it's the importance of finding worthwhile projects to occupy one's time.

Most recently, Homer has trained himself to use the toilet. Why, at twelve years of age, he suddenly chose to add this feat to his bag of tricks, I couldn't tell you. I've heard of cats being trained by their owners to use the bathroom instead of a litter box, but I've never heard of a cat taking the mastery of this particular task upon himself.

The first time I discovered his latest achievement was by accident. I awoke early one morning and stumbled into the bathroom. Flipping on the light, I found that it was ... already occupied, Homer balancing on the edge of the toilet seat.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said automatically, still half asleep. It was only after I'd left, considerately closing the door behind me, that I thought, *Wait a minute ...*

"Our cat's a genius!" I gushed to Laurence later that day.

"When he teaches himself to flush, he'll be a genius," Laurence replied.

It's true: The art of the flush is still beyond Homer's grasp. So checking toilets is another item I've added to the mental checklist I go through when I get home at night, while I survey the apartment for overturned picture frames, pried-open cabinets, and knocked-over knickknacks.

Because I never know exactly what to expect when I walk in the door—and because seeing Homer can be a startling sight all on its own for the uninitiated—I try to prepare guests when they visit for the first time. In the years since I met

Laurence and stopped dating, and as I reach an age where the number of new friends I make becomes fewer, this is something I've had to do with less frequency.

Still, I remember one occasion when I failed to give a new boyfriend the rundown before a first-time visit. At the outset of the evening, I hadn't expected to invite my date back to my apartment. By the time the decision was made, talking about my cats seemed like the sort of thing that might kill a romantic mood.

Homer, in those days, was particularly enamored of playing with tampons. Having encountered one by chance, he was fascinated by the way they'd roll around, and by the string at the end. He liked them so much, he figured out where I kept them stored in the cabinet below the bathroom sink and—with unerring patience and accuracy—mastered the task of forcing open the cabinet door and raiding the tampon box.

When I walked in with my date, Homer ran to greet me at the door. And there, hanging from his mouth, was a tampon. The whiteness of it stood out against his black fur in vivid, mortifying relief. He scampered around in gleeful triumph for a moment, then promptly ran over and sat expectantly on his haunches in front of me, tampon clutched between his jaws like a dog with a rawhide bone.

My date looked taken aback, to say the least. "What the ... is that a ..." He stammered for a moment, before finally managing, "Did something happen to your cat?"

I hunkered down on my heels, and Homer happily climbed into my lap, dropping the purloined tampon at my feet. "He's fine," I answered. "He doesn't have any eyes, is all."

My date appeared staggered by this piece of information. "*No eyes?*" he asked.

"Well, he was born with eyes," I explained. "But they had to be removed when he was a kitten."

THERE ARE SOME ninety million cats residing in roughly thirty-eight million U.S. households, according to Humane Society estimates—and so, in a sense, Homer is entirely typical. He eats, sleeps, bats around crumpled-up balls of paper, and gets into more trouble than I can keep him out of half the time. And, just like any other cat, he has very fixed opinions when it comes to what he likes and what he doesn't. Happiness, in Homer's world, is tuna fresh out of the can, climbing

anything that can support his weight, pouncing with mock ferocity on his two unsuspecting (and much, *much* larger) sisters, and napping in the patch of sunlight that falls into the living room just before sunset. Unhappiness is being the last of my cats to score a prime spot next to Mommy on the couch, a litter box that isn't immaculately clean, permanent denial of access to our apartment's balcony (blind cat, high ledge—it's easy math), and the word *no*.

But Homer looms larger than life in my imagination, and I often think his story can only be thought of in epic terms. He's the Cat Who Lived—an orphaned, half-starved stray who survived an illness grave enough to take his eyes at two weeks of age, and who nobody wanted to give a home to once it was clear he would pull through. He's Daredevil, the famed Marvel Comics superhero who lost his sight in an accident while saving a blind man, but who gained superhuman use of all his other senses. Like Daredevil, Homer's senses of hearing and smell, his ability to map and negotiate all obstacles in an unfamiliar room simply by walking through it once, border on the preternatural. He's a cat who can smell a single flake of tuna fish from three rooms away, who can spring straight up, five feet into the air, and catch a buzzing fly in midflight. Every leap from a chair back or table-top is taken on faith, a potential leap into the abyss. Every ball chased down a hallway is an act of implicit bravery. Every curtain or countertop climbed, every overture of friendship to a new person, every step forward taken without guidance into the dark void of the world around him is a miracle of courage. He has no guide dog, no cane, no language in which he can be reassured or made to understand the shape and nature of the hurdles he encounters. My other cats can see out of the windows of our home, and so they know the boundaries of the world they inhabit. But Homer's world is boundless and ultimately unknowable; whatever room he's in contains all there is to contain, and is therefore infinite. Having only the most glancing of relationships with time and space, he transcends them both.

Homer initially came into my home because nobody else wanted to take him. So it never fails to amaze me how fascinated people are—even people who aren't particularly interested in cats—when they meet him, or even when they just hear about him. He's the ultimate conversation starter, something I hadn't anticipated when I first adopted him. Ninety million cats out there means there are at least ninety million cat stories, but—at the risk of sounding unbearably prejudiced—I've yet to encounter a cat as remarkable as mine. At least once a week, every week for the past twelve years, he's done something that has amused me,

infuriated me, or flat-out astonished me—and he’s never more astonishing than when I see him for the first time all over again through somebody else’s eyes.

Oh, how sad! is often the first thing people say when they hear that Homer’s eyes had to be removed at two weeks of age. I usually respond that if you can show me a happier, more rambunctious cat anywhere in the world, I’ll give you a hundred bucks just to get a look at him. *How does he get around?* they’ll ask. On his legs, I answer, just like any other healthy cat. On occasion, when he’s especially enthusiastic in his play, I’ll hear the *bonk!* of his little head bumping into a wall or table leg he’d forgotten was there. It’s something that always draws a laugh from me, even while my heart cracks down familiar lines. I laugh because anybody who’s witnessed a cat in a playful frenzy, falling backward off a sofa or charging headfirst at a closed glass door, can’t help but chuckle. And my heart breaks because, in the best of all possible worlds, Homer would have been found a week earlier, when the eye infection he’d had might have been diagnosed as “serious” rather than “incurable.”

Of course, in that world, Homer almost certainly wouldn’t have entered my life in the first place.

MY FAVORITE MOMENT in the celebration of Passover—the holiday commemorating God’s leading Moses and the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery and into the Promised Land—is always the Dayenu, a joyous song sung loudly and accompanied by much clapping of hands and stomping of feet. *Hebrew for it would have been enough*, the Dayenu recounts the miracles God performed on behalf of the Israelites, insisting after each one that it, all on its own, would have been enough: If He had brought us out from Egypt and not carried out judgments against them, *dayenu!* If He had carried out judgments against them and not parted the sea for us, *dayenu!* If He had parted the sea for us and not supplied our needs in the desert for forty years, *dayenu!*

And so on.

Living with Homer, over the past twelve years, I’ve composed a Dayenu of my own. If Homer had simply managed to live beyond two weeks of age, it would have been enough. If he had simply learned to find his food bowl and his litter box all on his own, it would have been enough. If he had simply taught himself how to get from room to room in our home without any guidance, it would have

been enough. If he had simply learned to run, jump, play, and fearlessly do all the things they told me he might never do, it would have been enough. If he had simply made me laugh out loud every single day for over a decade, it would have been enough.

And if he had done nothing more than become one of the most loyal, affectionate, and courageous sources of joy and inspiration I've ever known ... well, that would have been more than enough.

In a seemingly hopeless situation, when no rational person could expect *anything* good, yet somehow ends up receiving *everything* good—these are things we call miracles and wonders. A few of us are lucky enough to see such wonders in our everyday lives.

So this book is for the others like me, but also for the ones who've given up on believing in everyday miracles and heroes; for people who love cats and for people who consider themselves firmly anti-cat; for those who think *normal* and *ideal* mean the same thing, and for those who know that, sometimes, stepping slightly to the left of what's normal can enrich your whole life.

To all of you I introduce Homer, the Wondercat.

Dayenu!



1 • Socket to Me

Yesterday made the twentieth day that I have been tossing
about upon the sea. The winds and waves have taken me all
the way from the Ogyian island, and now fate has flung me
upon this coast.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

YEARS AGO, BACK WHEN I STILL HAD ONLY TWO CATS, I WAS FOND OF SAYING that if I ever adopted a third I would name him Meow Tsetung and call him “The Chairman” for short.

“Don’t look at me like that, it’ll be *cute*,” I would insist when my friends regarded me as if I were a loon. “Little Chairman Meow.”

The joke was twofold: the name itself, and also the idea that I would adopt a third cat. I might never have taken the monumental step (so it had seemed to me at twenty-four) of adopting two except that I’d been living for three years with Jorge, the man I was sure I’d marry. We’d split up recently, and I had gained custody of our feline offspring—a sweet-tempered, fluffy white beauty named Vashti and a regal, moody gray tabby named Scarlett. I was grateful for my two girls every day, but also painfully aware of the potential complications they would create in my newly single life, complications I had never contemplated back in the days when I’d thought Jorge and I would be together forever.

I was staying in a friend's spare bedroom while I tried to save up for an affordable place to live, for example, but I would never be able to move into a more reasonably priced pet-free building. There was no point in even considering a relationship with a man who had cat allergies. I worked in nonprofit, running volunteer programs for the United Way of Miami-Dade, and I never had more than fifty dollars in the bank at the end of the month. Nevertheless, routine vaccinations, injuries, and illnesses would have to be paid for by me alone, no matter what their impact on my finances.

"Not to mention the social implications," my best friend, Andrea, would say. "I mean, there are only so many cats you can have when you're twenty-four and single. The neighborhood kids will start calling you Old Widow Cooper and throw rocks at your windows and say things like, *That's where Old Widow Cooper, the cat lady, lives. She's craaaaaazy ...*"

I knew she was right; I wasn't completely out of touch with reality. In my present circumstances, talking about a third cat was an absurd hypothetical, like daydreaming about what I might buy if I won the lottery.

Then one afternoon, a couple of months after Jorge and I broke up, I got a call from Patty, a young veterinarian only three years older than I was, who was the newest member at the practice that treated Scarlett and Vashti. Patty told me a long, sad story that would have been perfect for a cable movie, if only there were a station called *Lifetime for Cats*.

An orphaned, four-week-old stray kitten had been abandoned at her office, she said, after a virulent eye infection had required the surgical removal of both his eyes. The couple who had originally brought him in didn't want him. Nor did any of the people on her adoption list, not even the ones who had expressed a specific interest in adopting a handicapped cat. Nobody, it seemed, wanted to face this particular handicap. I was her last call, the last possibility she could think of, before ...

She didn't finish her sentence, and she didn't have to. I knew there was almost no chance that an eyeless kitten would be adopted from a shelter before his time ran out.

Don't, warned the Greek chorus that lives inside my head. *Yes, it's sad but, honestly, you're in no position to do anything about it.*

I'd always been an obsessive reader, a passionate lover of books, and I knew the kind of power words had over me. Pitting me against words like *blind*, *abandoned*, *unwanted*, and *orphan* was like sending someone armed with a toy rifle into trench warfare.

Still, I recognized the wisdom of my inner Greek chorus, even if I couldn't be as coolly analytical as it was. So I said, "I'll come in and meet him." I paused. "I'm not promising anything, though."

I should note that, prior to this, I had never taken an *I'll meet him and we'll see* attitude when it came to pet adoption. It never occurred to me to meet the pet in question first, to see if he was "special" or whether there was some sort of unique bond between us. My philosophy when it came to pets was much like that of having children: You got what you got, and you loved them unconditionally regardless of whatever their personalities or flaws turned out to be. While I was growing up, my family adopted or fostered numerous dogs, almost all of whom were strays or had been abused in their previous homes. We'd had dogs who couldn't be housebroken, dogs who chewed up carpeting and wallpaper, dogs who dug compulsively under fences or who even occasionally snapped when they were startled. My cats, Scarlett and Vashti, had been adopted a year apart from acquaintances who'd found them as six-week-old kittens—mange-ridden, half starved, and covered in fleas and sores—wandering the streets of Miami. I had committed to them sight unseen; the first time I'd met them had been the day they'd come to live with me.

So I felt more than a little dishonest, driving down to my vet's office the following afternoon. Patty might not know it, but I knew myself well enough to understand that when I'd said, "I'll come in and meet him," what I'd meant was, *I really don't want a third cat*

right now, but I'd feel like a bad person if I gave you a straightforward no after hearing this cat's story. So I'm leaving myself room to wriggle off the hook.

“We have to take him. We have to let him live here” had been the immediate response of my roommate, Melissa, when I'd told her about the blind kitten the night before—“here” being Melissa's one-story, two-bedroom, waterfront South Beach home, where I split the cost of utilities, groceries, and other household expenses while I tried to save up for my own place. But Melissa was beautiful, and an heiress, and the everyday obstacles that appeared insurmountable to me at this juncture in my life weren't even blips on her radar screen. Melissa didn't have to agonize over things like higher vet bills, or being unable to eventually find a home for herself and her brood of three (*three!*), or the prospect of being undateable. (I could already hear imaginary conversations among these mythical men I hadn't even met yet—let alone started dating. *Dude, she's smart, she's cute, she's a lot of fun—but she's got three cats! That's just messed up, dude.*)

I couldn't decide if I was even the right person for a kitten like this, a kitten who would undoubtedly have special needs I couldn't begin to anticipate. What if he never learned to get around on his own? What if my other two cats hated him on sight and made his life miserable? What if I simply wasn't up to the challenge of taking care of him? I could barely take care of myself. Arguably, given that I was living in somebody else's home at the moment, I *couldn't* take care of myself.

I'd been encouraged, briefly, by Melissa's use of the word *we*. I wouldn't be in this alone. In some small, crafty corner of my brain, it occurred to me that I could bring the kitten home and, if I proved unequipped to handle him, Melissa could always ...

“Of course, you're the one who has to make the final decision,” Melissa had added a moment later, “because he'll go with you when you move out.”

THE THING THAT was speeding me toward my vet's office as surely as the wheels and motor of the car I was driving, the thing that had gotten me to agree to meet this kitten in the first place, was guilt. If I didn't take him, no one would. I had always been an easy mark when it came to animals and everybody knew it. I was a veteran weekend volunteer at Miami's various animal shelters, and—back when Jorge and I were still living together—I'd always come home in tears, pleading with him against all reason to consider adopting one of the dogs or cats who stood to be euthanized if nobody stepped forward. My only run-in with the law thus far had been the time, in college, when I'd been arrested at a protest rally outside of my university's primate research center. I'd been the kid who stray dogs and cats followed to school because I would give them all the food out of my lunchbox, without considering how I planned to feed myself at lunchtime.

And it was exactly this kind of hazy, immature thinking, I told myself somewhat viciously as I slid into the parking lot outside my vet's office, this heedless disregard for future consequences, that had landed me exactly where I currently was in life—broke and alone after years of carefully constructing what I'd thought was an unshakable future.

I realize now that I was trying to manufacture a sense of anger. It was far easier to convince myself I was angry and put-upon than it was to admit I was terrified.

It was a ferociously muggy, late-August day. Silvery waves of heat shimmered and rose like evil genies from the pavement fronting the strip mall where my vet had her office. The receptionist greeted me warmly as I entered, summoning Patty, who popped her head out from a door behind the reception desk with a cheerful "Come on back!"

I followed her past rows of cages holding cats and dogs, which I'd noticed before but never paid much attention to. I'd always assumed they'd been left in the temporary care of my vet by owners who would eventually come to retrieve them. For the first time, I

wondered how many of them were actually homeless, waiting to be looked over by people like me who might or might not end up adopting them.

We reached the last examination room at the end of a narrow, wood-paneled corridor, and Patty opened the door for me. On the exam table was a lidless plastic box (“So you can interact with him,” she explained). I walked over and peered in.

He’s so tiny was my first thought. Both of my cats had been almost this young when I’d taken them in, but I’d forgotten how absolutely tiny a four-week-old kitten is. He couldn’t have weighed more than a few ounces. He had curled himself up into a miniature sphere in the farthest corner of the box, a fuzzy soft-ball that would have fit easily into the palm of my hand. His fur was all black, and it had that static-electricity fluffiness that very small kittens have, as if their fur has actively rebelled against the notion of lying flat. Where his eyes had been were two tiny stitches, and around his neck was one of those plastic cones they put on pets to keep them from scratching stitches out.

“I sutured the lids shut,” Patty said. “So it won’t look like he has sockets or anything—it’ll kind of look like he has his eyes closed all the time.” She was right. Looking at the X-shaped stitches where his eyes would have been, I was reminded of childhood cartoons where the drunkenness or demise of a character was indicated by X’s drawn over his eyes.

“Hey there,” I said softly. I scrunched down a bit, so my voice would come from the kitten’s level and not sound too booming or scary. “Hey, little guy.”

The black fuzzball in the corner of the box uncurled itself and stood up hesitantly. I tentatively reached a hand—a hand that suddenly seemed monstrous in size—into the box and lightly scratched the bottom of it. The kitten walked slowly toward the sound, his head bobbing uncertainly under the weight of the plastic cone. His nose bumped against one of my fingers, and he sniffed it curiously.

I glanced up at Patty, who said, “You can pick him up if you want to.”

I lifted him carefully, cradling him just below my chest with one hand supporting his bottom and the other around his chest and front legs. “Hi, little boy,” I whispered.

At the sound of my voice, he turned himself around and reached up to my left shoulder with his front paws; they were so small, they sank between the cables of the light cotton sweater I was wearing. He struggled a bit, and I could tell he was trying to hoist his full weight onto my shoulder. But his claws, such as they were, were too tiny to get a good grip. Giving up, he twisted again and brought his face as close to where my jaw met my neck as the plastic cone would allow. He tried to rub his face against mine, although all I felt was plastic against my cheek. Then he started to purr. The cone funneled the sound until it was so loud, he sounded like an improbably small motor.

I had expected that, having no eyes, he would be incapable of conveying much expression—and it occurred to me that this, perhaps, was the secret fear of the people who’d refused to adopt him. A pet whose face couldn’t register love, couldn’t reflect emotion, might always feel like a stranger in your home.

As I held him, though, I realized that it isn’t the eyes that tell you how someone is feeling or what they’re thinking. It’s the muscles around the eyes, which pull the corners up or push them down, crinkle them at the edges to convey amusement or narrow them into slits indicating anger.

This kitten didn’t have his eyes anymore, but the muscles around them had been left intact. And I could tell, from the shape the muscles were taking, that if he’d had eyelids they would have been half closed in an expression eminently familiar to me from my other two cats. It was an expression of utter contentment. The ease with which he slipped into it suggested that, despite everything he’d already been through—despite every reason he’d had to expect the opposite—in the depths of his kitten-y little soul, he’d always known

there would be a place where he could feel completely warm and secure.

And now, at last, he'd found it.

"Oh, for God's sake." I put him gently back into his box, then rooted around in my purse for a tissue. "Wrap him up, I'm taking him home."

• • •

PATTY WAS INSISTENT that the kitten remain with her a little while longer. She wanted to keep an eye on his stitches, concerned about possible infections. And she also hoped he might gain some weight before being subjected to the tender mercies of solid food and two full-grown cats. "You can take him home in a few days," she promised.

I was finally getting my Chairman Meow, but somehow a prefab name didn't seem right anymore. "You should call him Socket," Melissa suggested.

"That's awful!" I exclaimed. "His name is *not* Socket!"

She shrugged good-naturedly. "He'll always be Socket to me." I hadn't had much difficulty in naming Scarlett or Vashti. Scarlett had come to me named already; she'd been one of a litter of stray kittens found by my mechanic, who'd named her Scarlett because she'd been so dehydrated those first few days that she kept fainting. I named Vashti for the biblical Persian queen who'd refused to dance naked at a feast for her husband—the king of Persia—and a group of his drunken buddies. She was banished from the kingdom as a penalty for her refusal, an early feminist martyr as far as I was concerned. That *my* Vashti had grown from a sad, half-bald bag of kitten bones into an exotic longhaired stunner, who looked a bit like a Persian cat, had been a happy coincidence. I didn't want to stick this new kitten with something cutesy or obvious ("Ray" and "Stevie" had already been suggested by well-meaning friends as exactly the right name for a blind black cat), but I also didn't want to hang anything too solemn or portentous on him. He would

always be blind, it would always be an inescapable fact of his life, but I knew—even way back in the beginning—that I didn't want his whole life to be defined by his blindness alone.

I visited the kitten at the vet's office often over the next few days. His short life had already been more bewildering than anybody could imagine—I wanted there to be something familiar and reassuring when he finally came home with me, even if it was only my smell and the sound of my voice.

But I was also still nervous in more ways than I cared to admit. He was mine now—there was no going back from it—but I wanted to see for myself how he got around, how he encountered the world around him and learned to make his way through it.

So every afternoon when I'd finished work for the day, I would stop by Patty's office. She would take the kitten from his kennel and set us up in one of the exam rooms, allowing him to roam freely while I sat mostly silent in a corner of the room and watched him.

I could tell already that he was a tireless explorer. The weight of that plastic cone around his neck, which went before him like the shield of a knight-errant crossing enemy terrain, made it difficult for him to hold his head fully erect. But he almost always kept his nose to the ground anyway. The exam room was minuscule, but not an inch of it went unsniffed. When he encountered a wall or table, his tiny paws would cautiously make their way up its side, an engineer testing dimensions and thickness. The only thing he attempted to climb was the chair that stood in one corner of the room, although a large potted plant that stood in the opposite corner was also fascinating. This was my first instance of using the word *no* with him; I didn't want him to end up with a coatful of dirt, or to inadvertently tear the plant to shreds.

Finally it was the day before the kitten was supposed to come home, and still he was nameless. It seemed as if Socket was in danger of becoming his name by default.

He needed a name, and it needed to be the right one. So I tried to think of him as if he were a character in a story. His life had already

begun as so many of the best stories do—with trials and suffering, miraculous reversals and innumerable obstacles still to be overcome.

But it occurred to me that he wasn't just the subject of a story; he was also a creator of stories. Lacking even a concept of vision, I was sure he made things up to account for the world around him. How else to understand a chair that mysteriously appeared to block his path in a spot where only yesterday there had been no chair? What *was* a chair? Why and how did chairs come to be? And how to explain the omniscience of an adoptive mother who could instantly tell—no matter how silently he crept—the precise moment he was contemplating something forbidden? The fourth time he attempted to climb into the large, dirt-filled pot of the plant in the corner, I issued my fourth firm and unexpected “No!” The kitten's face crinkled into perplexity. He was, of course, unable to distinguish between “soundless” and “invisible.” *I was walking so quietly! How can she always know?*

You think, when you adopt a pet, that he will become a supporting character in the story of your life. But I was beginning to think I was now a character in this kitten's story. From a struggling single girl, racked with self-doubt and saddled with three cats, I had become an all-knowing and implacable deity, a being of great benevolence and mystery.

I watched him tentatively traverse that exam room—a landscape so small and, by now, familiar to me, so vast and unknowable to him. He navigated between the Scylla and Charybdis of a table leg and a small bowl of water that had been left out for him. Once he tumbled, face-first, into that water bowl. I snatched him up protectively, murmuring *Good kitty, good boy*, and he purred, content that the heavens favored him once again. No matter how many times he encountered the wrath of the water bowl, or leapt and misjudged the height of the chair, or ran into a table leg he'd forgotten was there, he persevered.

There's a place on the other side of this, he seemed to tell himself, *and things I must do there.*

He was a hero on a quest. But he was more than that; he was also the one who created heroes and myths about the gods—for the same reason myths have always been created: to explain the inexplicable. He was Odysseus and he was also the blind storyteller who'd imagined Odysseus, who'd seen life on an epic scale even when he couldn't see anything at all.

And then I knew what my kitten's name was.

"Homer," I said aloud.

He responded with a lusty *mew*.

"Good, then." I was pleased we agreed. "Homer it is."



2 • What Do You See in an Eyeless Cat?

You ought not to practice childish ways, since you are no longer that age.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

DURING THAT WEEK WHEN HOMER AND I WERE FIRST GETTING TO KNOW each other within the sanctuary of Patty's office, Melissa was busily spreading the news of Homer's imminent arrival among our circle of friends. The offhand question, "Did you hear we're adopting an eyeless kitten?" was the kind of thing that was sure to dramatically shift the flow of general conversation, inviting a flurry of additional questions in its wake. "Eyeless? *Eyeless?* You mean, like, he has no eyes *at all?*" So it was that, even before he came to live with me, the story of Homer was repeated so often and so identically that it came to feel like an official part of the family legends and formative anecdotes that made up the ongoing narrative of my life—the way, for example, my parents have spent more than thirty-five years relating in the exact same way the tale of how my mother went into labor with me at a rock concert, two weeks ahead of schedule, because "Gwen couldn't wait to hear all that music." (Had I gone on to become a rock star instead of a writer, by the way, that story would carry far more dramatic resonance today.)

It's true that I still slip into precisely the same language and cadence when telling the story about Homer's adoption as I did back then. But that's only because the questions I'm asked haven't changed at all. I've gotten questions about Homer from hundreds of people over the years, and they're always—*always*—some variation on the same three: *How did he lose his eyes? How does he get around? Can he find his litter box/food/water?*

And yet I never get tired of answering. Not because I'm so fond of talking about my cats in general, but because even though I've long since gotten used to Homer's blindness, I've never taken for granted, or stopped being inordinately proud of, how brave, smart, and happy my little boy has turned out to be.

I was having dinner with a new work-related acquaintance recently, and the subject of Homer came up. She had been telling me about her kitten, adopted less than a month earlier, and I regaled her with anecdotes of Homer's kittenhood adventures and misadventures. I had never discussed Homer with her before, but she found him as interesting as most people do when they hear about him for the first time. Then, out of nowhere, she hit me with a question that stopped me cold:

“Why did you adopt him?”

It was a question that might have sounded aggressive or hostile coming from somebody else, as if to say, *What could you possibly see in an eyeless cat?* Yet the woman's face was kind as she asked it, her tone gentle and sympathetic. It was a question posed in a straightforward way, with an apparently straightforward interest in hearing my answer.

And I wanted to give her an answer—one as simple and straightforward as the query had been. But it was a question that I quite literally had never been asked before; for the first time in more than twelve years I had no simple, automatic response at my disposal.

Because I'd never been asked this question, it had never occurred to me to wonder why nobody else ever asked it. Thinking about it

now for the first time, it made perfect sense that nobody would ask why I had adopted Homer, because the answer, on the face of it, seems obvious. Either I'd been so affected by his hard-luck story that I would have been miserable and guilt-ridden if I hadn't rescued him from almost certain death in a shelter—or we'd so immediately bonded, falling instantly in love with each other from the moment I first picked him up, that I couldn't have borne to leave him there. I realized that everybody, even the people who knew me best, my family or the friends I'd had for decades, probably thought that those were the reasons I'd adopted Homer.

And everybody was wrong.

What I remember most from those first few months after breaking up with Jorge was the overwhelming sense that I'd failed the first important test of my adult life. Everyone, including me, had assumed that Jorge and I would get married. What was the point of spending three years with someone if it didn't lead to marriage? But one sunny Sunday morning Jorge had informed me, in an entirely respectful and matter-of-fact way, that he wasn't in love with me anymore.

If I was honest with myself, I'd have to admit that I wasn't in love with him anymore, either. I had been twenty-one when we'd met, and at twenty-four I hardly recognized the girl who'd fallen in love with him. She was a scrapbook filled with old photos of someone who looked much like me, with my nose and my eyes, but whose clothes and hairstyle looked more like the girls' I'd gone to college with than the way I looked now. I'd been vaguely aware—on some not-quite-conscious level—that I was gradually changing, that the things I'd been sure I wanted only three years earlier might not reflect this newer me, whoever she was. But hearing the words *I'm not in love with you anymore* had struck me like a body blow. What if, I couldn't help wondering, the person I was becoming wasn't lovable?

I was also beginning to have doubts about my career path. Back when Jorge and I had been together, the typically low nonprofit salary I earned had been almost a luxury I'd indulged in, justified by

the fact that I was combining it with Jorge's much larger salary. It was increasingly clear that it wasn't a salary that could carry me safely into this new phase of my life. On the other hand, I wasn't sure what else exactly I was qualified to do.

It would be an overstatement to say that I had lost all faith in myself. But I was considerably less confident and optimistic than I had been only a year earlier.

I'd found it impossible to say no when Patty called and I heard Homer's story for the first time. But that doesn't mean I wouldn't have been able to say no eventually—in fact, I'd deliberately left myself the option of turning him down, believing that I probably would. Heartbreaking as Homer's story was, even I knew that I couldn't save every animal who deserved saving—I would have told myself that I'd already rescued two cats and was doing the best I could for them. I might have hated making that decision, I might have cried for days the way I used to cry when I came home from volunteering at an animal shelter, but, ultimately, I could have lived with it.

It's also true that, when I did meet him, Homer crawled into my arms with a seemingly immediate willingness to love and be loved by me. Even when I was holding him in that moment, though, I'd known that it wasn't really about *me* specifically—that if somebody other than me had shown up at my vet's office, and whispered to him softly, and picked him up gently, Homer would have been equally willing to love that person.

Sensing that he could have loved anybody as easily as he could love me was actually the first thing that grabbed my heart. Whatever else he might or might not turn out to be, this kitten was a creature with a tremendous capacity for love. The idea of someone having nothing but love to give, yet being unable to find anybody who wanted that love, struck me as unbearably tragic.

The other thing I realized was that, while he seemed loving, he wasn't scared or desperate to be loved, the way you would expect a kitten—or even a person—who'd experienced nothing but pain,

hunger, and fear to be. Nor was he hostile and defensive, a kitten who'd let a hard life stomp all the love right out of him. He was merely curious and affectionate. It was as if there was some innate source of courage within him, some inborn willingness to engage the world openly and joyfully, that even all the suffering and hardship he'd been through hadn't taken away from him.

It was a staggering concept for me at the time. I had been dumped, forced to move out of my home, and was having financial problems—and I'd consequently developed an unfortunate tendency to approach life as if it were a grim struggle, to allow self-pity to consume me whenever I lost some of those struggles.

But here was this cat, whose ordeals made my own worst days seem like a week at Disney World, and his attitude upon meeting me appeared to be, *Hi! You seem goodhearted and fun. Don't you find that people generally are goodhearted and fun?*

It probably sounds like I'm about to contradict what I said earlier, that I ended up adopting Homer because I thought there was something special about him. It wasn't that, though. Not exactly.

What happened was that I caught a glimpse of something I desperately needed to believe in at that point in my life. I wanted to believe there could be something within you that was so essential and so courageous that nothing—no boyfriend, no employer, no trauma—could tarnish or rob you of it. And if you had that kind of unbreakable core, not only would it always be yours, but even in your darkest moments others would see it in you, and help you out before the worse came to the absolute worst.

Or, as my grandmother used to put it, “God helps those who help themselves.” If I recognized all that within this kitten now, and took him home because of it, then I would be proving my own theory right.

So I didn't adopt Homer because he was cute and little and sweet, or because he was helpless and he needed me. I adopted him because when you think you see something so fundamentally worthwhile in someone else, you don't look for the reasons—like

bad timing or a negative bank balance—that might keep it out of your life. You commit to being strong enough to build your life around it, no matter what.

In doing so, you begin to become the thing you admire.

What I'm trying to say is that, when I decided to bring this eyeless kitten home with me, I made my first truly adult decision about a relationship. And, without realizing it, I established the standard by which I would judge all my relationships in the years to come.



3 • The First Day of the Rest of His Life

A good woman, Eurycleia, daughter of Ops, guided [him] to his room, and she loved him better than any other woman in the house did, for she had nursed him when he was a baby.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

SCARLETT HAS ALWAYS ENJOYED SLEEPING ON SOFT, CLOTH-Y PILES OF things, like pillows or towels or piled-up blankets. Vashti prefers dozing on hard surfaces. As I left for work on the morning of the day when I brought Homer home for the first time, Scarlett was napping on a pile of laundry in the back of my closet, while Vashti rested (comfortably?) on top of a wooden desk, her cheek pressed against the sharp corner of a large dictionary.

They looked so peaceful as they regarded me with their heavy-lidded, half-sleeping eyes that I felt a momentary twinge at the havoc I was about to wreak in their lives. “I’ll see you guys later,” I said quietly on my way out the door. “With a big surprise ...”

Vashti responded with a gentle cooing sound, while Scarlett merely blinked at me once and rolled over to sprawl on her back, all four paws in the air.

I left work at exactly five thirty that afternoon and headed straight for Patty's office. Homer had already been loaded into a small purple cat carrier with HOMER COOPER scrawled on a strip of masking tape across the top. I peeked inside, but Homer was all-black and eyeless, and the only thing I could make out clearly was the white of the plastic cone around his neck. Everybody, including Patty, was almost tearful as they waved the two of us off.

Homer was completely silent during the car ride home. In the first instance of what would prove to be a decade of constant and frequently irrational worries, this concerned me. I hadn't spent much time around cats growing up, so what I knew of them came primarily from things Patty told me and my hands-on experience with Scarlett and Vashti. And Scarlett and Vashti *hated* their carriers, screeching like howler monkeys the second I loaded them in—particularly Vashti, who was so unassertive under normal circumstances that she never raised her voice above the level of a squeak.

It seemed unnatural that Homer was so quiet. It might be that he was simply sleepy, or wearily used to being removed from one place and brought to another for reasons that were, to him, inexplicable. Perhaps he even enjoyed the seclusion of the carrier (Vashti and Scarlett loved to make small caves for themselves in boxes and shopping bags) and found the motion of the car soothing. Or, a dark corner of my mind pondered, maybe he was so terrified at this bewildering turn of events that he was afraid to make a sound. I tried to speak to him reassuringly as I drove. *We're almost there, Homer. We'll be home soon, little boy.*

I had thought a great deal about the best way to introduce Homer to his new home. My first resolution was that he should be confined to a relatively small area for a day or so. I felt he was more likely to grow comfortable and familiar with his surroundings if he wasn't intimidated by too much space all at once. While this would be true of any cat—Scarlett and Vashti has been introduced to their new home one room at a time over a period of several days—I reasoned that a blind kitten in particular was likely to be overwhelmed by

more than a single new room at first. And, I was sure, he would be far more likely to get lost or tripped up, unable as he was to create a visual memory of how one room led into another. Truth be told, I wasn't entirely sure he would ever be able to do this—and I was more anxious on this score than I cared to admit—but I had gained a certain amount of confidence after watching Homer seamlessly navigate the exam room in Patty's office after one or two passes, and I had decided to worry about these eventualities if and when they came up.

I also planned to keep him completely separated from Scarlett and Vashti until his stitches came out. Vashti was very social and extraordinarily patient, but she hadn't encountered a new cat since I had first adopted her and introduced her to Scarlett—and I suspected that, sweet-tempered though she was, she'd also grown accustomed to being the “baby,” and to receiving all the attention Scarlett never seemed to want anyway.

Scarlett had been far from overjoyed when I'd first brought Vashti home. Although in fairness to Scarlett, it should be noted that Vashti, who had been infested with a horrific case of mange (fur loss and itchiness caused by tiny mites on her skin), had come home with me fresh from a sulfur dip at the vet's office. The sulfur had not only turned what was left of her long white fur a startling and unnatural shade of yellow, but also left her reeking with the stench of rotten eggs.

Vashti had been beside herself when she realized that added to the ecstasies of being well fed and itch-free for the first time in her six weeks of life was another cat for her to play with. Scarlett had spent the next few days alternately hissing at and fleeing from this tiny, smelly, bright yellow puffball that followed her everywhere and cavorted in joyous circles around her whenever she put so much as a paw out from under the bed, where she'd taken up a resolute temporary residence.

Scarlett had grudgingly gotten used to Vashti, however, and had even come to enjoy having another cat to scamper around with. So I

was hopeful that, with time, Homer would integrate just as seamlessly into our family.

I entered the front door of Melissa's house carrying Homer in his purple kitten carrier, and Scarlett and Vashti ambled over to sniff at it curiously. Homer persisted in not making any sound, but I felt his weight shift as he balled himself up in the far corner of the carrier. Vashti peered with interest at the carrier's contents, but Scarlett took one whiff and immediately backed up several feet, a deeply disgusted expression on her face. *Oh, God ... not another one ...*

"You guys can meet your new brother later," I told them and headed into my bedroom, closing the door behind me. *"Later" can be "never" as far as I'm concerned*, Scarlett's retreating backside and haughty tail flick clearly indicated. But Vashti wasn't used to being shut out of a room that I was in and gave a few half-swallowed squeaks of protest (*ngeow! ngeow!*) from the other side of the door.

The spare bedroom I was utilizing at Melissa's house was connected to a small bathroom, which was where I had set up Homer's litter box. I set the carrier down beside it and unlatched it, lifting Homer out and placing him in the litter box. There were three things I wanted to be certain Homer would know how to find: his litter box, his food dish, and his water bowl. I knew that blind people learned how to find things in their homes by counting the steps from, say, a kitchen stove to the dining room door. While I didn't expect Homer to actually count his steps, I thought that if he got to know the rest of our home in relation to where those three things were, he'd be more likely to find them on his own.

I'll admit I was apprehensive, both that Homer might be unable to find his litter and that he might not know what it was for. Scarlett and Vashti had immediately grasped the concept of a litter box and hadn't required any additional training. I was therefore unsure how to litter-train a kitten, and hoped I wouldn't have to.

When I set him in the litter box, Homer immediately squatted and peed, then dug around furiously to bury it. *"Good boy,"* I told him. *"Good boy!"*

From there I walked slowly, and with deliberately loud footsteps, through the door that led to my bedroom, where I had set up his food and water in the exact center of the room—easier to stumble upon by accident, I guessed, even if Homer couldn't learn or remember on his own where they were. I crouched next to the two tiny bowls containing dry food and moist food (I wasn't sure if Homer would be able to smell dry food, so I'd put down both), tapping the tile floor next to them with my fingernail and making a *pss-pss-pss* sound that I'd found always served to summon Scarlett and Vashti.

Homer, when he had finished tidying up in the litter box, obligingly hopped out and made his way over to where I crouched. His neck bobbed from side to side beneath the plastic cone he still wore. He walked in that bandy-legged way of very young kittens, and he wove unsteadily, as if he were slightly drunk. Although I was usually haphazard when it came to storing shoes and clothes in the closet, I had been careful to clean all extraneous items from the floor of the room, to minimize any chance that Homer would bump into something. Even the shoes I'd worn that day and removed upon my arrival at home had been placed on top of my desk, and there was nothing to impede his progress from the doorway of the bathroom to where I was stationed ten feet away with his food.

Still, Homer seemed confused at first by all the empty space around him. The bedroom was relatively small, probably no more than 150 square feet, but it clearly struck Homer as cavernous. He hesitated for a few seconds, his head raised and his little comma of a nose crinkling as if he were attempting to discern a clear path by smell. But the repeated tapping of my fingernail on the floor seemed to reassure him. Once he realized there was a purpose to the sound, and that the sound came from me, he made a fast-trot beeline toward it and the food bowl. His nose bumped into the small mound of moist food, and he took a few eager bites.

I had no idea if water had a smell that was discernible to a kitten and didn't want to leave it to chance that he would find it on his own. I had placed the water bowl next to the dish that held the dry

food, and I wiggled a few fingers in the water. “Are you thirsty, kitty?”

At the light splashing sound my fingers made in the water, Homer raised his head from the moist food and cocked it slightly to one side. Then, as if he’d intended to do it all along and had simply been awaiting a cue, he buried one minuscule paw in the bowl of dry food and immediately began to fling it into the water bowl. The sound it made as it hit the water was nearly identical to the sound my fingers had made splashing around in the bowl, and Homer turned a proud, expectant face in my direction.

I burst out laughing. “Not exactly what I had in mind,” I told him. “Let’s try this again.”

I walked back over to the litter box and called Homer over. As he had before, he headed straight for the sound of my voice. When he reached me, I once again picked him up and placed him in the litter box. This time Homer appeared confused. *Didn’t we do this already?* Then I repeated the walk over to the food bowl, and Homer once again ate eagerly from the moist food. I waggled my fingers in the water bowl, and Homer once again flung the dry food into it.

I wasn’t sure if Homer found this entertaining or if he was doing what he thought I wanted him to do. Either way, I decided it was best for all concerned if I moved the water bowl out of range of the dry-food dish. This time, when I splashed my fingers around in it, Homer walked over and drank. Scarlett and Vashti, when drinking from their water bowl, would center their heads over the bowl and drink from the middle. I noticed that Homer, however, carefully pressed his tongue against the inside of the ceramic bowl, forcing up a few drops at a time into his mouth. I remembered when he’d fallen face-first into the water bowl at the vet’s office, and it occurred to me that he was afraid it might happen again.

By now, the square of sunshine in the bedroom window had purpled into twilight. I heard Melissa’s car pull into the driveway. The front door opened and closed, and then there was a light knock

at my bedroom door. “Is he here?” Melissa’s voice said softly through the door. “Can I see him?”

“Come on in,” I replied in an equally restrained voice.

Melissa opened the bedroom door a crack, poking her face in and peering around before she quickly opened the door just wide enough to slide her slender frame through, closing it soundlessly behind her.

Homer was sniffing around the edge of the bed, but he came to an abrupt halt when he heard the door open. He turned his face up in Melissa’s direction. The blackness of it, in the middle of that plastic cone and unbroken by color of any kind, looked like the velvety black heart of a sunflower.

“Ohhhhhh,” Melissa whispered. Her hands flew to cover her mouth. “He’s so tiny!” She took a step toward him, and Homer uncertainly backed away. Melissa looked at me. “Can I pet him?”

I patted a spot next to me on the bed. “Let’s see what he does,” I told her.

I was curious to see what would happen. Many cats are shy of newcomers—it’s one of their most common traits. And Homer had more reason to be leery of new people than most cats. But I had also sensed, when I’d first adopted him, that he was friendlier than the average cat.

Now we would see.

Melissa settled next to me on the bed, and both of us held our breath. Homer walked slowly in our direction. “It’s okay, Homer,” I said. He appeared unsure how to get from the floor, where he was, up onto the bed, where the sound of my voice was coming from. He reached out a paw tentatively and sank his claws into the bed’s comforter, which hung all the way down to the floor, tugging it slightly as if testing its weight. Finding it to be strong enough for climbing, he hauled himself up onto the foot of the bed.

“Hey, Homer,” Melissa said. She lightly patted a spot on the bed in front of her. “Come here and say hi.”

Homer trotted across the bed with his wide-legged, neck-rolling gait, his fur even fluffier after his climb. Purring loudly, he placed his two front paws on Melissa's leg and stretched his head up again, sniffing the air around her. Melissa gently rubbed behind his ears and under his chin, and he fervently pressed the entire front of his face against her hand. It was as if, because there were no eyes to become irritated by such a gesture, there was nothing to keep Homer from rubbing as much of his head as he could against someone else.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that I'd always been somewhat intimidated by Melissa. She had been a good friend to me—after all, she'd taken me in with my two cats after Jorge and I had broken up—but it had always seemed to me that there was something flinty and unyielding in her. That she was compassionate was something I knew; Melissa clocked even more hours than I did with nonprofit causes. But on a strictly personal level, she could be tough. She had little patience with my everyday fears and foibles, and this made sense—because when you were as beautiful and wealthy as Melissa was, what could you possibly know of ordinary human failings?

But holding Homer, something in her seemed to unbend. Her face lit up in a way I'd never seen. We flipped on the TV to catch part of an old movie and chatted idly for a while about nothing in particular—her day at work, a party we were supposed to attend later in the week—but she was almost wholly focused on Homer, who purred and nestled happily into her lap.

Eventually, Homer climbed out of Melissa's lap and walked carefully toward the side of the bed. When he reached the edge and his outstretched paw encountered empty space he paused, obviously flummoxed. My first impulse was simply to pick him up and place him on the floor. *It would be so easy for me to do it for him*, I thought.

Homer, however, gave no indication that he was waiting for assistance—from me or from anybody. He backed up into a slight crouch, then took a wild leap. He landed with enough force that his front legs splayed out a bit, and the bottom of his cone hit the floor and bounced back up. "Oh!" I exclaimed, one hand rising

involuntarily to my face. But Homer was fine. He collected himself for a moment, then took off in a loopy half run toward his food dish. I was somewhat surprised, yet enormously pleased, to note that he seemed to remember exactly where it was—either that, or the smell of the moist food was detectable enough to guide him in its direction.

“Are you concerned about how unsteadily he’s walking?” Melissa asked.

I *had* been concerned about it, to the point that I’d been mulling over whether I should call Patty in the morning. But I heard myself saying, “No. I think ... I think it’s just because of that cone he’s wearing.”

I’d started out wanting to deny I was worried, in that irrational way that makes *saying* you’re unworried seem like the same thing as *being* unworried. As I said it, though, I knew it was probably true. At first I’d thought the cone was too heavy for Homer and was tempted to remove it, even if it meant jeopardizing his stitches. But then I realized that it wasn’t the heaviness of the cone—it was the fact that it was interfering with Homer’s ability to use his whiskers.

Cats have two sets of “eyes”—their actual eyes and their whiskers. Cats’ whiskers are three times thicker than the rest of their fur, and the roots go far deeper than other hair roots, connecting all the way into their nerves. Whiskers are a constant source of sensory feedback for a cat: They detect air currents that alert cats to movement around them, and they sense the presence of furniture, walls, and other solid objects, acting as a sort of extended peripheral vision that helps a cat maintain balance and a sense of orientation in space. They’re part of the reason why cats are so famously able to see in the dark.

But Homer’s whiskers were trapped inside that cone, unable to do him any good. Deprived of both regular vision and sensory input from his whiskers, he was truly and completely blind. It was the reason why he staggered about the room like someone who’d been

blindfolded and spun in circles. Any cat would be thrown off balance if deprived of his whiskers. Homer was doubly so.

Removing the cone, however, would mean the possibility of scratched-out stitches. Much as it pained me, there was no question that Homer's cone would have to remain where it was for the time being.

Melissa and I finished watching the movie, and when she left I decided to turn in early. Homer followed me—either by smell or sound (or both)—into the bathroom and sat next to the sink while I brushed my teeth and washed my face. He used his litter box one more time, finding it with no trouble whatsoever, then trotted back into the bedroom after me. I turned out the lights and settled into bed, planning to pull Homer up, but he was already climbing after me on his own. The street outside was quiet as I lay down and settled onto the pillows, and the silence in the room was broken only by the faint sounds of Melissa chatting on the phone in the other room, and of Vashti squeaking in mild indignation (because Vashti had, heretofore, *always* slept with Mommy) on the other side of the bedroom door.

Homer crawled up the length of my body, climbing onto my chest and turning around in a circle a few times before settling down on the spot just above my heart. I was drifting off when I heard an odd, squelching sound and felt something tickling my ear.

I opened my eyes but couldn't make out much in the dark. Then I realized that Homer was nursing on my earlobe. The cool outer edge of his cone pressed against my cheek. His front paws kneaded the patch of pillow directly behind my ear, and his purr was a low thrum, steadier and more subdued than it had been earlier while Melissa was petting him.

I held my breath, sensing that if I moved at all, Homer would stop what he was doing—although he probably *should* stop, shouldn't he? I felt a little silly. It was the kind of thing where, had somebody burst unexpectedly into the room, my impulse would have been to shove Homer away from my ear and insist, *It's not what it looks like!*

This was an entirely new experience for me, something that neither Scarlett nor Vashti had ever done. It was obvious that Homer had missed having a mother, that—whatever Patty or I wanted to tell ourselves about how Homer would forget, may have already forgotten, the trauma of his early life—on some deeply fundamental level, Homer remembered that he'd been deprived of something he was supposed to have. He was supposed to have a life that included a mother's care, that was comprised of affection and adequate nourishment and comforting rituals in the dark.

My hand rose to stroke his back, and his purring grew louder.

I realized something else. It meant something to be trusted by this cat. There was a difference between being trusted by cats or even animals in general and being trusted by this kitten in particular. I was too sleepy to pursue the thought, or articulate it in any logical way, but I understood in that moment that this was something I'd felt without being aware of it from the first moment I'd picked Homer up in the vet's office.

My last conscious thought was that Melissa had known this, too, and that it was why she had appeared so much softer when she was holding him.



4 • The Itty Bitty Kitty Committee

“Alas,” said he to himself, “what kind of people have I come amongst? Are they cruel, savage, and uncivilized, or hospitable and humane?”

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

HOMER'D HAD A GOOD FIRST DAY. NEVERTHELESS, MY APPREHENSIONS remained. Homer had seemed anxious simply walking from the bathroom to the bedroom. The sound of my hand and my voice had drawn him forward—would that always be what it took to make him feel at ease in his new life? Would his life be the constant struggle against fear and limitations that everybody seemed to think likely? Most people who heard about Homer seemed to take it for granted that his life would be circumscribed by trepidation and disability.

But one of the first things I learned about Homer the following morning was how ecstatic he was merely to wake up. I was surprised to see that he had slept the whole night through curled up on my chest, barely moving at all. I soon found that Homer was eager to sync his schedule with mine—sleeping when I slept, eating when I ate, and playing whenever I was in motion. Whether by nature or necessity, he was the quintessential copycat.

I would also learn that Homer tended to be a remarkably happy little kitten. Just about everything contributed to the surfeit of joy he found in his new world—even things I would have normally

classified as “cat-adverse.” The whirring of the garbage disposal, for example, or the apocalyptically loud whine of the vacuum cleaner (sounds that terrified not just Scarlett and Vashti, but every dog or cat I’d ever seen) brought him straight over at a fast waddle. His ears would be fully pricked up, his neck and cone turning from side to side as he ran. *Yay! A new sound! What is that new sound? Can I play with or climb onto it?*

But nothing thrilled him as much as waking up at the beginning of each day. As soon as I sat up that first morning, he began to purr in a humming, distinctive way. There was a melodic undercurrent to it, like birdsong. He rubbed his face so urgently against my hands that he lost his balance and flipped over onto his back, struggling against the weight of his cone and looking for all the world like an incapacitated beetle. Undeterred, he righted himself with a mighty heave and climbed into my lap to prop his front paws on my chest, rubbing his whole face vehemently against mine. I felt the softness of his kitten fuzz and the prickliness of his stitches on my skin.

This is so great! I’m still here and you’re still here! He was so tiny that a single stroke of my hand sufficed to cover his entire body. When I touched him, he dug minuscule claws into my shoulder and attempted to pull himself up, latching onto my earlobe and suckling at it once again.

“I’m going to assume that means you’re hungry,” I said. “Let’s see if you remember where your food bowl is.”

I sat up and deposited him on the floor next to the bed. He was unprepared for this, apparently, because he tripped over his first step, his cone-encased chin once again hitting the floor. But he bounded up quickly enough and toddled straight for his food bowl, after which he scurried to the litter box.

The discovery that food and litter were exactly where he had left them the night before was another moment of bliss. His singsong purring continued unabated, audible even from where I sat clear across the room.

HOMER'S HAPPINESS, ASTONISHINGLY, seemed to be because of, and not despite, the fact that his world had grown so much larger. Lacking vision, Homer's universe was only as big as whatever space he was in. It's true that it had once been far larger than it now was—when he was a stray, it had encompassed all of Miami and the world beyond that—but that universe had been lonely, painful, and incomprehensibly dangerous. The relief from pain and danger had come at a price, and his world had shrunk to the size of his kennel at the vet's office. But Melissa's house was an eternity of possibility, an infinity of space and smell and sound.

Homer proved to be so incredibly reluctant to be left alone—and so eager to explore—that by his first afternoon in Melissa's house, we released him from the confines of my bedroom, although I was careful to ensure that Scarlett and Vashti were never in the same room that he was in at the same time.

The miracle was that, within all this space and possibility, Homer was safe. There were things he could count on here, despite how big everything was. Food and water were available in abundance, and could be found predictably in the same spot every day. In this new world, an unusually loud noise meant opportunity, not danger. He could fall asleep at night knowing that no predator would harm him while he slept, and wake up each morning in the arms of someone who loved him.

To say that he must have regarded these things as miraculous would be assuming too much similarity between a kitten's mind and a human's. If anything, I was the one who thought in terms of miracles whenever I contemplated what his life had been—and what it would be still, if not for the quirk of fate that had brought us together. But Homer's happiness was there, and it was indisputable. I had moments of sheer, unreasoning joy in witnessing it, but at the same time it impressed upon me a sense of responsibility, accompanied as it was by the knowledge that it fell to me to ensure the safety that enabled his joy.

“I will always keep you safe, little boy,” I would murmur, caressing his fur while he slept.

Upon hearing about Homer for the first time, Melissa’s father had asked us whether we planned to get a Seeing Eye dog for our blind cat. He’d meant it as a joke, of course, but the question remained as to how I would teach Homer to get around, giving him as free a rein as possible in this new, bigger world while minimizing any of the perils that world might hold for him.

I had spent the days before bringing Homer to live with us trying to think through what it would take to blind-kitten-proof the house. I bought soft felt caps for the sharp edges of tables and bed frames, invested in childproof locks for cabinets where cleansers and other hazardous materials resided, bought childproof latches for toilet lids (a small, eyeless kitten who accidentally fell in and couldn’t see his way out might drown, I thought), and plugged up crevices around the entertainment center where a blind kitten might wedge himself in or hopelessly entangle himself in wires and extension cords.

It was impossible to anticipate everything, but I ended up being glad I had spent so much time thinking about things beforehand—because Homer was impatient to discover and claim every nook and cranny. Homer solved the Seeing Eye dog problem by utilizing me as his Seeing Eye human—following my footsteps so closely everywhere I walked that, if I happened to stop short, his little nose ran straight into my ankle.

“I feel like Mary,” I said to Melissa. When she looked at me quizzically, I added, “You know ... *and everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go.*”

At first, I thought Homer trailed me with so much determination because he was afraid to investigate on his own. Patty had warned that Homer was likely to be more timid and less independent than other cats. “But he won’t know that he’s blind,” she’d added. “It’s not like the other cats are going to tell him, *Hey, you’re blind!*”

It was soon apparent, though, that Homer didn’t follow me so doggedly because he was nervous about exploring on his own. It

was simply the most efficient way of learning his way around, of discovering where the nemeses of table legs and umbrella stands were lurking to trip him up. Leaving a pair of discarded shoes or a wet umbrella lying in the middle of the floor went from being an act of carelessness to bordering on animal abuse. I stepped over small things that changed place from day to day—but Homer, who walked in a persistent straight line wherever I had just been, would trip and halt in the confusion of an obstructed path that, only the day before, had been clear. *Was this here yesterday? I don't remember this being here yesterday.* I'll admit I had always tended toward the sloppier side of the neatness spectrum. But living with Homer required the discipline of order, and I soon learned habits of tidiness that would come to define my adult life.

In addition to not knowing he was blind, Homer had also clearly never been informed of his “underachiever” status. He got into absolutely everything—anything I was doing, he had to be a part of. If I was cleaning out a closet, Homer was next to me, digging away at the stacks of old clothes or boxes. If I was making a sandwich, Homer would scuttle up the side of my denim-clad leg (to this day, there's nothing he loves climbing so much as a pair of jeans) and propel himself onto the kitchen counter. If I was sitting on the couch, he would scale the side of my body until he reached the top of my head, resting there for as long as I could maintain my posture and hold my head level. Catching sight of our reflection in a darkened window one night, with the cone-wearing Homer curled up atop me, I thought we looked like some sort of futuristic half-human/half-satellite cyborg. Homer frequently fell asleep right in the middle of whatever he was doing, as kittens are wont to do, one paw clutching a pilfered scrap of paper or wrapped around his food bowl, like the lesser characters in *Sleeping Beauty* who, enchanted along with her, slumbered in the act of threading a needle or salting their soup.

By following and exploring so relentlessly, Homer got to know our home astonishingly quickly. Melissa and I were astounded at how, within only a couple of days, the only time Homer bumped into

anything—in the whole house—was when he got into one of what we called his “whirling dervish” modes, where he would hyperactively spin around like the Tasmanian Devil until he’d lost his sense of where he was in space. At such times, the *clomp!* of the front of his cone connecting with a wall or table leg could be heard echoing through the house.

There was only one limitation placed on Homer’s freedom and happiness in those early days, and that was when it came to his eating habits. Melissa and I learned that some official discipline was in order the first time we prepared a meal for ourselves in Homer’s presence. We had just settled ourselves onto opposite ends of the couch with dishes of food when Homer leapt onto the couch and unceremoniously climbed directly onto my plate, hungrily grabbing whatever tidbits were closest to his mouth.

I was reminded of an early scene in *The Miracle Worker* when, before Annie Sullivan’s arrival, Helen Keller would walk around the family dinner table and put her hands into everybody’s plates, helping herself to whatever she wanted. This, clearly, was unacceptable behavior, and I decided to nip it in the bud.

I lifted Homer up and placed him on the floor. “No, Homer,” I said, in a tone that left no room for argument.

Homer cocked his head back and forth in a way I would soon become familiar with—it meant that he was trying to figure out from my tone of voice what I wanted from him. He did it a few times before responding with the plaintive, cheeping *Eeeuu* that kittens make—the kind that seems to require the entire force of their body to produce. Reaching up the side of the couch with his two front paws, he repeated, indignantly this time: *Eeeuu!*

Melissa and I couldn’t help laughing, but we refused to give in on this one point. “I said *no!*” I told him.

Homer sat for a moment with his face turned up toward us, as if waiting for a sign of leniency. Then, with a small sigh, he prowled away toward his own food in the other room. There was a certain amount of defiance in his step, as if he were consciously keeping his

kittenish waddling down to a minimum. *Fine, then. I have my own perfectly good food right here ...*

IT WAS HOMER'S first lesson in discipline, and it was made tougher to reinforce by the indulgence of our inner circle of friends, who came over eagerly to meet him. If there was one thing Homer dearly loved, it was meeting new people. And if there was one thing the people who met Homer loved, it was letting him do whatever he wanted. Suddenly Homer was part of an extended family, what Melissa and I referred to as "the itty bitty kitty committee," which included innumerable indulgent godparents who were perfectly happy to sneak him bits of tuna or turkey or meatballs from their plates. They also showered him with the toys they'd brought over for him: toys from their own childhoods and toys purchased specifically for cats; toys that hummed, buzzed, rang with attached bells, or were otherwise made enticing by their ability to produce sound. Everybody, myself included, assumed that playthings with bells and whistles—and not the visual stimuli of feathers and doodads—would hold the most appeal for a blind kitten.

Homer had to be introduced to new people in just the right way or else he was apt to be hesitant. With his whiskers trapped in that cone he still wore, it was nearly impossible for him to sense any movement in his close vicinity—so it always took him by surprise when a hand other than my own came to rest on his head or back, seemingly out of nowhere.

We developed an introduction ritual, wherein I would hold the new person's hand in my own and bring the two of them together under Homer's nose, so that he could smell my familiar scent mingled with the new one. Once Homer had been properly introduced and knew that the new person was Mommy-approved, he was eager to make friends. Any kind of physical contact was a source of profound joy to Homer, who was so much more tactile than sighted kittens and who loved to burrow, nuzzle, cuddle, rub,

and bring as much of his small body into contact with others as he could.

What visitors found most astonishing was Homer's ability to distinguish among people he knew, and to remember the difference between someone he'd already met and guests who were strangers. "I met him once for five minutes," a friend remarked when, upon a second visit, Homer headed directly for him and climbed into his lap. "How can he recognize me when he can't even see me?"

"Well, he can *smell* you," I replied. Cats actually tend to recognize each other more by smell than by sight anyway—this ability was simply fine-tuned in Homer.

As fascinating as Homer's super-keen sense of smell was his ability to hear things that nobody else—not even other cats, or so it seemed—could hear. I remember one of our friends, eager to test the widely held theory that deprivation of one sense led to super-enhancement of the others, waving her hand back and forth silently in the air, about a hundred feet from where Homer lay sleeping in my lap. As soon as her hand began to move, Homer's head was up, his ears, nose, and neck turning and twitching. This in itself wasn't so unusual—Homer's ears and nose were always at work when he was awake, giving him a constantly kinetic air. But the sound of the air currents shifting around the hand that moved silently up and down all the way across the room had reached his ears—with enough force to wake him up. He jumped from my lap immediately, standing on the floor as his head bobbed up and down in perfect time with our friend's waving hand. He toddled across the living room straight for her, his front paws stretching imploringly up her legs as he arched his head and neck into the air. *What's making that sound? Bring it down here!* Laughing, she lowered her hand for Homer to sniff before scratching him affectionately under his chin while he purred in loud contentment.

People were instinctively gentle with Homer. The sense I'd had that first night with him, that it meant something different to be trusted by Homer, was clearly a sense that others had as well.

South Beach at that time was populated by people who had, for the most part, moved there from other places, and who had grown used to being called “misfits” or “freaks” back in their original hometowns. They were artists and writers, costume-loving club kids or cross-dressing performers at the local drag bars. There was a reason why, in our more sardonic moments, we referred to South Beach as “the Island of Misfit Toys.”

Melissa loved collecting strays and misfits, creating a constant salon of sorts in her home. Perhaps it was because Homer was also a “freak” who had been shunned remorselessly by so many others that everybody took to him so quickly.

But I don’t think so.

A friend once asked me why it was that stories about animals and their heroism—a cat that pulls her kittens from a burning building, say, or a dog that walks across fifty miles of Iraqi desert to reunite with the soldier who fed him—are so compelling.

I didn’t have an immediate answer, beyond observing that I also loved those stories. A few days later, though, it occurred to me that we love them because they’re the closest thing we have to material evidence of an objective moral order—or, to put it another way, they’re the closest thing we have to proof of the existence of God. They seem to prove that the things that matter to and move us the most—things like love, courage, loyalty, altruism—aren’t just ideas we made up from nothing. To see them demonstrated in other animals proves they’re real things, that they exist in the world independently of what humans invent and tell each other in the form of myth or fable.

Homer’s blindness didn’t imbue him with mystical qualities. It didn’t make him more perceptive or a better judge of character than other animals. But he did bring out the best in those around him. Our friends knew that the couple who had originally brought Homer to my vet had insisted he be put to sleep, and that a score of others had refused out of hand to adopt him. This created unequivocal “us” versus “them” camps. To be one of “us,” to understand how

remarkable Homer was, to show him greater kindness and accept him despite his differences, was to be a better person than the “them” who’d rejected him. Homer, for his part, was grateful for every bit of the attention he got from the people around him.

Cats are what’s known as solitary hunters, which is science’s way of expressing what most of us can observe—the extent to which cats are more independent than dogs, the way they can fend for themselves and crave “alone time” in ways dogs typically don’t. Dogs in the wild form packs, but cats hunt on their own or form loose social groups that are more about respecting one another’s individual territory than tracking down food cooperatively.

But Homer was always a pack animal—realizing, instinctively, more than any other cat, that his safety depended on numbers. Humans became his pack. I was the pack leader, and anybody I introduced to him was accepted without question. This was a kitten who everyone thought would have been *more* leery and reluctant to accept others than a typical kitten, but it was in Homer’s nature to be accepting of the people he met, to climb into their laps and purr and rub affectionately against them at the first overture of friendship.

I remember somebody remarking once, as I extracted an alarmed Homer from an afghan he’d become tangled under, how patient I was with him. It struck me because it was the first time anybody had called me patient—probably because I wasn’t a particularly patient person. It wasn’t that I couldn’t *be* patient. But it was certainly the case that, whenever I was, it was because I was consciously instructing myself to do so (*All right ... be patient now ...*), the way that you have to remind yourself to do the things that don’t come naturally.

But with Homer, it did come naturally. I didn’t have to give it any thought at all.

For his own part, Homer wasn’t much of a philosopher. All he knew was that he was happy, and he was loved. And he would go

on, over the course of years, to do all kinds of things that dazzled and amazed me.

But some of the most amazing were things he didn't do at all. They were things that happened around him, merely because he was there.



5 • The New Kid

Anyone with even a moderate amount of right feeling knows
that [you] ought to treat a suppliant as though he were
[your] own brother.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

FOR AS LONG AS HOMER HAD HIS STITCHES IN AND HIS CONE ON, HE HAD to be kept separated from Scarlett and Vashti. The logistics involved in keeping them apart—while giving Homer plenty of time and space to acquaint himself with his new home; while also giving Scarlett and Vashti a fair amount of freedom and reassuring them they weren't suddenly unloved just because there was a new kitten in the house—were even more complicated in practice than they sounded in theory. When Melissa was home, I would sometimes give Scarlett and Vashti free range while Homer stayed locked up with Melissa in her bedroom. When Homer, or Melissa, or both of them, lost patience with their confinement, I would hustle Scarlett and Vashti into my bedroom and allow Homer his run of the house. If Scarlett and Vashti were still in my bedroom come bedtime, I shepherded them back out so Homer could sleep with me.

As the days went by, I began to feel like the philandering husband in a French romantic farce, with the constant opening and closing of bedroom doors and doing everything in my power to ensure that the wife and the girlfriend never ran into each other. It got to the point

where the creak of the bedroom door drew baleful looks from Scarlett and Vashti. *We know, we know ... other room ...*

The situation was far harder on Vashti, who was just over a year old, than it was on Scarlett. Vashti was an outgoing cat who loved to be around people, especially me. She had never tracked my footsteps as closely as Homer did, but before Homer's arrival she'd always followed me from room to room and had slept every night curled around my head on the pillow. After more than a week of being separated from me so much of the time, she was becoming noticeably morose.

Scarlett had traditionally been more of a loner. At two years of age, Scarlett was the cat that people who didn't like cats thought of—aloof, independent to a degree that bordered on anti-social, and stiff as piecrust if anybody besides me attempted to touch, pet, or otherwise approach her. Poor Scarlett suffered from a serious PR problem on this account. Even my best friend from college, Andrea, who now lived in California with two cats of her own, was apt to refer to Scarlett as “that wretched cat.”

To my own ears, I sounded like a girl with an abusive boyfriend when I defended our relationship: *You don't know what she's really like! You don't know how sweet she is when we're alone together!* This was true; Scarlett was capable of a great deal of affectionate cuddling and purring, as well as spirited games of chase-the-paper-ball or hide-and-seek, when she and I were one-on-one. And it's also true that Scarlett had grown to enjoy playing with Vashti—on a selective basis, and at moments of her own choosing. For the most part, though, she was content to be left to her own devices. Constantly being locked up when Homer was around didn't sadden her so much as it offended her sense of personal dignity. *As if I wanted to mingle with the riffraff out there.*

The hardest part of all this enforced separation was that I'd been forced to confine Homer to my bathroom when I left for work in the morning, concerned that unmonitored time alone with the other two cats would imperil his stitches. When I put him in there he would howl—not the loud, complaining meow of a cat who's being

confined against his will, but the gut-wrenching, awful screams of an animal experiencing stark terror. Brave though he was, the one thing that terrified Homer nearly beyond endurance was being alone. This made sense, actually, because even though Homer technically didn't know he was blind, instinct told him his greatest vulnerability was that something, or someone, could sneak up on him unawares. That same instinct undoubtedly knew it would be far more difficult to sneak up on a kitten surrounded by people or other cats than on one kitten by himself. Alone, therefore, was an unnatural state of affairs from Homer's perspective. Even making a nest for him out of some of my old clothes, so he would have something that smelled like me, and placing a small radio in the bathroom tuned to NPR—of all the “constant human voice” stations, this one struck me as the most soothing—didn't ease his anxiety.

Listening to his cries from the bathroom, it took every ounce of willpower I possessed not to let him out. My first impulse was to open the door, fly into the room, scoop him up into my arms, and assure him that nothing bad would ever, *ever* happen to him as long as I was there. Thinking about what might have gone into producing his terror, what he'd been through blind and defenseless on the streets before he'd been found and handed over to my vet, was the kind of thing that kept me awake many a night as I pressed him closer to my chest and buried my face in the warmth of his fur.

At last, after a week in his new home, the great day arrived when Homer's stitches came out. This meant that his cone, too, was a thing of the past. He would be able to start grooming himself, and I would no longer have to wipe his bottom for him after he used the litter box. And he would never have to be alone again.

“Although you might wish you were,” I told him as we drove to the vet's office, imagining Scarlett's probable reception of him.

Eeeeuu! Homer replied from the confines of his carrier in the backseat of my car.

LIBERATION FROM THAT plastic cone was a pure draught of sweet ecstasy. Upon being released from his carrier after arriving home from Patty's office, Homer went straight for the living room rug, where he lay on his back and flipped from side to side, rapturous that he could now do so without any limitation on his range of motion.

Scarlett and Vashti entered the room cautiously—half expecting to be locked up again, or simply suspicious of the newcomer. Homer was still rolling around on his back on the living room rug, but he jumped up immediately and sat at attention as Scarlett and Vashti approached him.

I'd always known he was tiny—he was still under six weeks old, after all—but he looked positively dwarfish as Vashti and Scarlett circled him. I held my breath as they took turns sniffing him inquisitively, flinching backward with slitted eyelids when Homer responded in kind. When Homer reached up an impish paw toward them, they recoiled. Scarlett's own paw came up in immediate response, batting at Homer's head in a manner that clearly indicated he was to sit still until they'd finished inspecting him. Homer lowered his paw and hunkered down his neck a bit, huddling himself up as tightly as he could while still sitting upright.

Vashti sniffed around his ears a few more times, then began to gently lick the top of his head. I was encouraged by this, and so, apparently, was Homer. He lifted his head once more to sniff around Vashti's nose and whiskers, and his paw rose again as he attempted to touch her face and fur. Startled at his touch, Vashti bolted a few feet away, continuing to regard Homer from this safer distance.

Scarlett, meantime, had had enough and walked slowly away in Vashti's direction. After a moment's hesitation, Homer toddled after them. When Scarlett saw this she picked up her pace and made for the bedroom door, having no intention of allowing Homer to catch up to her.

"Don't worry, you guys will get used to each other," I said, with more confidence than I felt.

Doubtful, the look on Scarlett's face indicated, and her walk quickened into a run.

PEOPLE ASK ME all the time if Scarlett and Vashti know that Homer is blind. I think blindness is too abstract a concept for a cat to grasp, so what I usually say is that Scarlett and Vashti realized Homer was different at first—klutzy, as far as they were concerned, and somewhat rude, and not terribly good at being a cat—but that, by now, they've come to accept him as he is. I know it confused them when, for example, this bumbling little kitten would leap enthusiastically onto the couch and unwittingly land atop one of their sleeping heads, backing up hastily upon realizing the spot was occupied. Couldn't he see somebody was already sleeping there? When awakened in this fashion, Vashti and Scarlett would grimace in annoyance and cast a look at me that said, *What's with the new guy?*

Homer was also apt to play much rougher than Scarlett or Vashti was accustomed to. The two of them had a favorite game, one that was mostly of Scarlett's devising with Vashti happy to follow her lead. The game went like this: At some point when Vashti's back was turned or she was otherwise distracted, Scarlett would leap upon her and whap her in the face a few times with her front paw. Scarlett's claws were always retracted (retracted claws were an essential part of this game). Vashti would respond in kind, and the two of them would engage in a fullblown slap fight, whapping at each other's faces and paws, until Vashti landed what was—in Scarlett's opinion—one blow too many. Whereupon Scarlett would flatten her ears and arch her back slightly, a signal to Vashti that it was time for her to knock it off. Once Scarlett had decreed Game Over, the two of them would go off, unruffled, in their separate directions.

Homer was a boy, and he didn't have much use for these kinds of subtle girly games. Homer wanted great life-and-death battles, the fierce drama of perseverance and triumph in the face of crushing

odds. Homer's idea of the perfect game had nothing to do with slap-and-retreat. His favorite game was to leap onto Scarlett's and Vashti's backs and pin them down while they struggled furiously, sinking teeth and claws into whatever he could reach.

He didn't intend to hurt them by doing this, and would always back up in confused alarm if either of them squealed in pain or anger. But as far as Homer knew, anything that escaped his grasp could disappear into the black void of *gone forever*. Homer could never assume that any plaything—whether a squeaktoy or the body of another cat—would be findable again once he was no longer touching it. If I dangled a string in front of him for him to try to catch, a game that Scarlett and Vashti both loved, he could sense the string but always went for my hand instead, digging his claws into my skin to keep both string and hand from disappearing. It was this same tendency that made him grabby when it came to sharing toys with the other cats. If Scarlett and Vashti were batting around a ball of paper between them, Homer would bound over and clasp the ball of paper tightly in his claws to keep it from spinning off into infinity. This inevitably led Scarlett and Vashti to walk away—clearly, Homer was hogging all the action—while Homer was left to bounce the ball of paper around in his tight claw with a perplexed expression at finding himself so suddenly alone. *Don't you guys want to play with this anymore?*

So he tended to dig his claws into things, like the other cats' flesh, without meaning to do them any harm. I spent long hours training Homer to retract his claws when playing—mainly by encouraging him to play with me, then issuing a harsh “No!” and abruptly ending the game when his claws came out—but in the meantime, he wasn't winning Vashti and Scarlett over.

I think what most surprised Scarlett and Vashti, who weighed eleven and nine pounds, respectively, was that Homer never got tired of stalking, or at least attempting to stalk, the two of them. Surely, had he been able to see how very much bigger they were than he was, he would never have contemplated it.

But Homer couldn't see how much bigger they were. What's more, it's entirely possible that he had no understanding of the concept of relative size. He might have been a six-week-old kitten who still had a distinct waddle to his walk, but in his mind's eye he was one of the Big Cats—a panther, maybe, or a mountain lion.

His efforts at playing the mighty hunter hardly ever produced satisfactory results. He was able to leap upon Vashti whenever he wanted, but only because Vashti—conditioned by a lifetime of bending to Scarlett's will—adopted a philosophy of passive nonresistance. Homer would jump onto her back, a minuscule black mound on top of a much larger white one, nipping at Vashti's neck in a vain effort to get her to fight back or do *something*, for crying out loud.

But Vashti would just lie there patiently while Homer thrashed around, turning resigned eyes upon me that seemed to cry, *Oh, the humanity!*

Scarlett, by contrast, was nobody's patsy and always put up a fight. She was Homer's White Whale, his mortal nemesis. The unequivocal sacking of Scarlett was the pot of gold that lay at the end of all Homer's rainbows, and I think it was the dream of his life to finally—indisputably—best her.

The will was certainly there, but his tactics were woefully inadequate. Homer had all of a cat's normal instincts to creep noiselessly and crouch down before springing. Unfortunately, he never understood that, since he wasn't crouching down *behind* anything, he wasn't any less conspicuous to his intended victim than he would have been if he were preceded by a marching band.

It was as good as a play, watching the drama unfold when Homer would take it into his head to attempt yet another assault on Scarlett. You could tell the exact moment when, with a tilt of his head, he caught the faint sounds of her stirring across the room. He would hunker down into his stalking posture, taking a few breathlessly slow, silent steps in her direction. Then he would stop. Still crouched low, he would run for four or five more steps. Then

he would stop again. He repeated this process—slow, then fast ... slow, then fast—”sneaking” up on Scarlett directly from the front.

You could almost hear Scarlett heave a sigh and see her roll her eyes heavenward. *Again?* The look on her face was invariably one of bemused contempt, as if she were observing some new species of idiot. She’d wait for him to get close enough to spring, wriggling his backside in joyful preparation for what would assuredly be his moment of victory, and then—with a casual disdain that verged on boredom—Scarlett would swat him a few times on the head with her front paw, making it painfully obvious that she’d known exactly where he was the whole time. Homer would sit there flummoxed (*Why didn’t it work this time?*), and Scarlett would turn and stride with cold dignity into the other room, swishing her tail as if to say, *That’s quite enough of that.*

Perhaps realizing the futility of trying to take an unsuspecting Scarlett from a sitting position, Homer would sometimes attempt to catch her in midflight. One afternoon, I saw a gray blur whiz past me at breakneck speed, followed by Homer—racing as fast as his little legs would carry him—in mad pursuit. I laughed long and loud at the visual of this half-pound kitten chasing an eleven-pound, full-grown cat. Scarlett leapt to the safety of a kitchen countertop, glaring down at Homer who was making his best, if unsuccessful, efforts to scale the side of the counter to reach her.

Homer never caught her, but he did frequently come close. I would often come upon a disgruntled Scarlett, angrily settling herself onto a sofa arm or the top of a coffee table, and a few feet away would be Homer, sitting on his haunches, a tuft of gray fur in his mouth.

“Homer, were you just chasing Scarlett?” I would ask in a severe tone.

Homer would turn toward me with an innocently blank expression, unaware that *I could see* the incriminating clump of gray fur still clinging to his snout. *Who, Scarlett? I don’t think she’s been here recently ...*

Poor Homer had no truly bad intentions; he didn't want to hurt anybody. He was a kitten and he wanted to play. He was blind and he wanted to be sure that whoever he was playing with didn't run away from him. Why didn't Scarlett and Vashti understand that? Many was the time when I found Homer, having been recently abandoned by the two of them, turning his head and ears from side to side as he tried desperately to track down the slightest sound that would indicate where they were. He would utter a sad little *mew?* as if he were playing a game of Marco Polo all by himself, waiting for a response that never came. *Hey, guys? Where'd you go?*

"You know, they'd probably play with you more if you weren't so rough with them," I would tell Homer. The pity in my voice always brought him over for a round of cuddling and head rubbing. *Why don't they like me, Mommy?* But the advice—alas!—was never heeded.

In true big-sister fashion, however, it was Scarlett who ended up being Homer's most instructive influence, who encouraged Homer to develop his abilities to climb and leap as he did everything in his power to keep up with her. If Scarlett could climb a six-foot cat tower to get away from Homer, then why couldn't Homer climb it, too? If Scarlett could leap to the top of a desk or dresser, then there was no reason why Homer couldn't climb up the side of it, even if he wasn't able to leap directly up the way Scarlett did.

Homer was a typical little brother in many ways, always wanting to play with the big kids, who were far more interested in playing with each other and who regarded him, at best, as a mildly annoying "baby." But like all younger siblings, he learned by imitation—trying things he might never have otherwise tried and learning more quickly than he would have on his own.

And it was usually in Scarlett's presence that Homer could be found whenever I wasn't there. When curling up for a nap with me wasn't an option, Homer always felt safest sleeping somewhere near Scarlett. I think, in his mind, Scarlett was the strongest one in the house next to me, despite the fact that she was also the "meanest"—or maybe because of it. When Homer wasn't in one of his

hyperactive, jump-on-Scarlett-at-all-costs moods, it was surprising how respectful he was of her.

Safety in numbers, right? you could almost hear Homer thinking as he curled up (always curled up, because Homer never—ever—slept sprawled out on his side or back) wherever Scarlett was dozing, close enough for protection but with enough distance left to indicate courtesy.

Scarlett would open one eye and regard him indulgently for a moment before settling back into her nap. *Don't push your luck, kid.*



6 • Don't Be Happy. Worry.

He might have known that he would not prevail with her, for
when the gods have made up their minds they do not change
them lightly.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

IT MAY HAVE STARTED WITH THE PLASTIC BAG. THE EXCESSIVE WORRYING, I mean.

Like many a new mom, I found myself growing eyes in the back of my head where Homer was concerned, as well as an extra set of ears and an almost preternatural awareness of where Homer was, what he was doing, and what his needs were at any given time.

This had become doubly true since Homer's stitches had come out and he'd taken to tearing around the house after Scarlett and Vashti. Soon he wasn't content to merely cover the ground they did, and he began discovering mischief all on his own. Sometimes I would lose track of him for a few minutes and find him in the most unbelievable places—dangling by his front paws from the middle shelf of a bookcase (how had he even gotten up there?), or wedged in the back corner of the cluttered cabinet beneath my bathroom sink, having managed to prise open the cabinet door.

His new obsession was scaling the floor-to-ceiling drapes that hung in the dining room, like one of those Spider-Man types you read about who hand-over-hand their way up the side of an office building. “Homer!” I would shriek when I found him hanging on the drapes by a single claw, six feet in the air. Homer would swing the slight weight of his nine or ten ounces around until all four claws clung to the drapes once again, climbing as quickly as he could to put himself above my reach.

Look, Ma! I always imagined him thinking. *No eyes!*

In contemplative moments, I would reflect that there was something inspirational in the way Homer was willing to climb and climb anything at all without any idea as to how high he was going, or any plan for safely regaining the ground once he’d reached the top. There was something to be said for that level of fearlessness.

For all that it was inspirational, however, it was also terrifying.

Every parent knows those moments—the ones when you suddenly realize you haven’t seen your child for at least fifteen minutes. You curse yourself for having become so occupied with something else that you lost track of his whereabouts. *Where is he? What if something happened to him? Why wasn’t I paying attention?*

It had already become a point of pride with me to insist that Homer was a perfectly normal kitten. Better than normal, even. I would have taken the head off of anybody who suggested that Homer needed “special” care because of his “special needs,” angrily insisting that Homer was just as capable of taking care of himself as either of my other two cats, or as any “normal” cat out there. When people asked whether and how a blind kitten could find his litter box, I would reply that Homer could not only find his litter, he could find his way to the top of the kitchen counter and into the cabinet where the canned tuna was kept, distinguishing the difference between a can of tuna (which he loved) and a can of tomato soup (to which he was indifferent), while both were still in their sealed cans. He’d root around in the cabinet, shoving all other canned goods out of his way, until he identified the can of tuna fish,

using paws and nose to push it from the cabinet and onto the counter. *Feed me this!*

Beneath all that righteous indignation, however, and my insistence that I didn't need to worry about Homer any more than I worried about Scarlett and Vashti, was the truth: Homer *wasn't* like other cats, and I did worry about him more than I worried about my other two.

This fear was all my own, and Homer shared none of it. It had been predicted that his blindness would make him more hesitant and less independent than a typical cat. But if anything, the opposite was true. Because Homer was unable to see the hazards in the world around him, he lived in blissful unawareness of their existence. What was the difference between climbing to the top of a three-foot-high sofa and nine-foot-high drapes if you couldn't see how high you were going anyway? And what was the difference between jumping down from either one when every leap you ever took was a leap into uncertain outcomes, based on nothing but blind faith in invisible landing points?

In the Daredevil comic books, occasional story lines find Daredevil regaining his vision. Although he retains the rest of his superpowers, he suddenly finds himself incapacitated, afraid to attempt the daring stunts he normally undertakes when blind. *Are you crazy?! he seems to ask the reader. I'm not jumping off that! Look at how high it is!*

But there was no omnipotent writer who, with the stroke of a pen, could restore Homer's eyes to him. The only absolute fear Homer knew was that of being alone. As long as somebody was with him—whether it was me or one of his feline sisters—Homer had no notion that there were other things in the world that could harm him.

Which brings us back to the plastic bag.

It was a late-fall afternoon, and Homer was now about four months old. He had lost his kittenish bandy-legged gait, and both his walk and his coat were decidedly sleeker than they'd been when he was only a few weeks of age. Every hair on his body, down to the

lush whiskers that now exceeded the width of his body by a good three inches on each side, remained a luxurious onyx black. He was growing, although not as quickly as my other two cats had grown—and this, in itself, was something I worried about. Patty assured me, however, that kittens, like children, grow at different rates. And it was also clear that Homer was destined to be a petite, fine-boned cat, one who would undoubtedly remain smaller than average into his adult life.

It was a Sunday and I had decided to enjoy my day off by immersing myself in a novel. I had been concentrating deeply when I realized, on a level that hadn't yet risen to fully conscious thought, that it had been some time since I'd last seen Homer.

Homer liked to curl up in my lap while I read, but the fact that he hadn't this time wasn't something that, in and of itself, would have alarmed me. It wasn't unusual for him to prowl around for mischief and mayhem while I was distracted with something else.

Then I heard the sound of a plastic grocery bag rustling in the kitchen. I had been shopping that morning, and I'd left a plastic bag on the kitchen counter for the small refuse items we didn't like to leave in the larger trash can that was emptied once a week. Homer—who had by now climbed up my leg to reach the counter often enough to gauge its height on his own—was clearly up there playing with the bag. Happy that I knew where Homer was and what he was doing, I settled back into my book. A few minutes later, however, I heard a panicky and repetitive *Mew! Mew! Mew!*—the kind of cry that, previously, Homer had only uttered when he'd been locked up alone in the bathroom.

I tossed my book aside and raced into the kitchen, where I found Homer entangled in the plastic bag. He had stuck his head through one of the handles and twisted it up somehow, so that it was slowly tightening around his neck. His head was buried in the bag itself, and his back claws worked helplessly to free his head and upper body. It looked as though he'd crawled into the bag but, unable to see how to get back out, he had mistaken the opening of the handle for an exit, which was why he had snared himself so far into it.

“It’s okay, Homer,” I said. I tried to sound calm, for his sake as well as my own. It was difficult to tell exactly how tightly the bag’s handle was pressing into his neck, but I was as terrified as he was—afraid he would suffocate or strangle himself before I was able to rescue him.

I lifted both kitten and bag from the counter, slipping a finger between the handle and Homer’s neck—to keep it from tightening any further—and murmuring, *It’s okay, little boy, it’s okay*. Homer was still struggling fiercely, but I was able to quiet him enough that I could work his neck and head free of the bag.

What kind of a moron leaves a plastic bag lying around with a blind kitten in the house? I berated myself. *What would have happened if you hadn’t been home? Homer would have died and it would have been ALL YOUR FAULT!*

For all that I worried over the perils of Homer’s climbing and jumping and running around recklessly and leaping wildly, headfirst, from some six-foot perch and falling off backward from God only knew what, this was what had finally felled him: a plastic bag. I had thought that maybe I worried about Homer too much—but apparently, I hadn’t been worried enough. For all the foresight I tried to command in keeping his home environment safe, there were dangers lurking that neither of us had foreseen.

Homer quickly bounced back from his near-death experience. After half an hour of burrowing his face so far into my chest that it was like he was trying to find a way inside my body, he fell into a deep sleep and woke up refreshed and ready for more trouble. Vashti was in the other room nosing around a bottle cap she’d found, and Homer bounded to her side, hoping to get in on the action. The plastic bag, and its attendant moments of terror, seemed completely forgotten.

But it stuck with me for a long time. I kept a much closer eye on Homer after that, unwilling to let him do much more than walk in a straight line across the floor. Anything more daring earned him a swift and unarguable “*No, Homer!*”

EVEN AS A kitten Homer was far more verbal than most cats, and more sensitively attuned to the sound of my voice. If it had been too long since I'd last spoken to him, Homer would paw at my leg and mew insistently. When I did talk, he would sit in front of me with a very serious expression on his face, cocking his head from side to side as if attempting to decipher the meaning of my words. Cats are notorious for being untrainable, but Homer knew his name and responded to simple commands. The sound of my "No!" always brought him to an immediate halt, no matter how clear it was that he wanted to continue whatever he was doing.

After weeks of my reprimanding Homer whenever he attempted anything more adventurous than playing with his favorite toy, a small stuffed worm with a bell in its tail that had first belonged to Scarlett, a new meow was added to his vocabulary. I thought of this as his "checking in" meow. If he wanted to climb a tall piece of furniture, or forage in the bottom recesses of a closet, he would check in with me first. *Mew? Can I?*

"No, Homer" was the almost invariable response.

Can I follow Scarlett and Vashti onto the screened-in porch? "No, Homer." *Can I climb up to that small empty shelf on the entertainment center?* "No, Homer." *Can I bat around these cords on the Venetian blinds?* "Good God, Homer! Do you know how quickly those cords could wrap around your neck and strangle you?"

I could tell that Homer was becoming anxious and frustrated. To act boldly, to investigate every intriguing sound or smell he came across, was in his nature. Holding himself back was not. But if an errant plastic bag could be the cause of a near household tragedy, who knew where else perils were hiding? As much as I hated myself for constantly thwarting him, I was sure I was doing the right thing.

Sure, that is, until one day when Melissa observed me forbidding Homer from climbing up a ladder-back chair. *He's so little!* I thought. *And that chair looks so high!* "You know," Melissa said, "I think you may be over-parenting him." When I didn't respond, she added,

“Come on, Gwen, give him some space. You’ll end up raising him all stunted and nervous.”

That was easy for Melissa to say. Melissa wasn’t the one who was responsible for Homer. The world was a dangerous place for a blind kitten, and I had made a promise to Patty, to Homer, and to myself—not a promise spoken aloud, but certainly there’d been an understanding—that I would make the world safe for Homer. Even if “the world” that Homer occupied was confined to the square footage of our home.

But did I want to do that at the expense of Homer’s high spirits and sense of adventure?

You don’t normally think about how you’re going to “raise” a pet. You bring him home, train him as necessary, teach him a few tricks or commands, and then simply enjoy each other’s presence.

I was twenty-five at the time, and not accustomed to thinking about how I wanted anybody’s life to turn out other than my own. But now I found myself thinking about Homer’s life and how I wanted to raise him—what kind of, for lack of a better way of putting it, person I wanted him to grow up to be.

When I put it to myself that way, the answer was simple. I didn’t want him to be crippled by fear and self-doubt. I wanted him to be as independent and “normal” as I already made a point of telling everybody he was.

AFTER A HARD day at work a few nights later, I decided to relax in a warm bath. Homer followed me into the bathroom, greeting me with the high-pitched *mew?* that meant he was asking permission to jump onto the ledge of the tub so I could pet him while I bathed.

My first impulse was to refuse, afraid he might lose his balance and fall into the tub. But I found myself wondering ... why shouldn’t I let him? The water wasn’t especially hot. It wasn’t like he was going to get soap in his eyes, and he wouldn’t drown as long as I was there to catch him. So I said, in a tone I knew Homer would

recognize as encouraging, “Okay, Homer-Bear, you can come up if you want to.”

Homer scrabbled his way onto the ledge of the tub, and it was all of about thirty seconds before he slipped on the tile and fell into the water. He flailed around for half a second, but by the time I had reached over to assist him, his front legs had found the side of the tub and he was already lifting himself out.

I climbed out also. If there’s one thing that’s the stuff of cats’ nightmares, it’s sudden and total immersion in water. I would have thought the experience would be even more nightmarish for Homer, who had probably had no idea that water existed in larger quantities than what could be found in his water bowl. I picked him up in one hand, expecting him to be scared stiff. But the rhythm of his heart was as steady and untroubled as if he were lying on my chest at night, waiting to fall asleep.

Homer’s thoroughly drenched fur stuck out from his body at crazy angles that would have been comical under different circumstances. I reached for a towel to dry him off. As soon as he felt the stroke of the cloth, however, he squirmed and struggled until I put him down on the ground, where he promptly began to lick himself clean. Water-rumpled though he was, there was dignity in his posture. *I can do it myself!*

“Okay, Homer,” I said quietly. I opened the bathroom door a crack so that Homer could leave if he wanted to and stepped back into the tub.

I assumed that Homer would bolt as quickly as he could from what had proven to be an aquatic chamber of horrors. But there was an overhead heat lamp in the bathroom. It was, I suppose, as good a place to dry off as any.

Homer leapt back onto the ledge of the tub, stepping carefully for a moment or two until he found a spot that was still dry. Then, with an enormous yawn, he settled down to doze peacefully while I bathed.



7 • Gwen Doesn't Live Here Anymore

Zeus does not bring all men's plans to fulfillment.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

HOMER WAS JUST OVER FIVE MONTHS OLD WHEN MELISSA TOLD ME THE time had come for me to find a place of my own.

Melissa and I hadn't been friends for very long—only a few months—when I'd broken up with Jorge and she'd invited me to move in with her. Our friendship was one that had sprung up very suddenly, and we'd come to feel so extraordinarily close within such a short period of time that we hadn't actually been as comfortable with each other as we'd thought before we became roommates.

The reason on paper for my eviction was that Melissa had another friend who needed a place to stay for a while. Neither of us had expected, when I'd first moved in, that I would end up staying the nearly seven months I'd been there. Our mutual concern for Homer had smoothed over numerous small, day-to-day tensions, but undoubtedly, had it not been for Homer, I would have moved out long ago.

"Homer's welcome to stay as long as you need him to," Melissa rushed to assure me. "I'd be happy to keep him."

My nonspecific life plan, up until I adopted Homer, had been to scrape by on my current nonprofit salary, living with roommates

until some hazy, undetermined future date when I would either land a big enough promotion to be entirely self-sufficient or get married. Neither a big salary boost nor wedding bells seemed to be in my immediate future, however. Nor did I have any friends who were hunting for roommates. Under different circumstances, I might have scoured the classifieds for some up-and-coming professional girl of about my own age who would have been happy to split rent and share a home with my two relatively mellow cats.

I didn't have two cats anymore, though. Now I had three.

Three cats were a lot to ask somebody else to live with—especially when one of them, Homer, was active enough for five. And I was still (and always) concerned enough about Homer's safety that the restrictions I would impose on somebody else's home life could be both unfair and unattractive. In addition to super-hearing and super-smell, Homer of late had developed super-speed. He was frantic to know what lay on the other side of the front door to Melissa's house, through which people disappeared and didn't come back for hours at a time. As soon as he heard keys jangling outside, Homer would race for the door at breathtaking speed—less cat than comet-like black blur—hurling himself through even the smallest crack between door and door frame and making it halfway down the driveway on a few occasions before Melissa or I could catch him.

The one thing that could *never* be permitted was for Homer to get lost outdoors. To thwart our little would-be Houdini, we were forced to enter the front door of the house sideways, keeping the door closed as far as possible while still allowing ourselves just enough space to squeeze through, one leg extended at Homer-level to block him from slipping past.

How could I ask a stranger to live that way? How could I ask somebody to childproof toilets or tie closed sliding closet doors (which Homer was a whiz at prying open) without sounding like a nut?

And even if I could ask somebody to do those things, and I found somebody who was willing, could I trust somebody else? Anybody I lived with would have to be someone *I knew* was 100 percent trustworthy, someone who would never slip up. Where would I find such a person?

These were questions without good answers. To keep Homer would mean that I had to have a place of my own. But I could no more afford a place of my own—in anything except Miami's worst neighborhoods—than I could grow Homer's eyes back for him.

When I reached this point in my calculations, I started giving serious thought to Melissa's request. (And it was a request, not an offer—because Melissa loved Homer and wanted to keep him almost as much as I did.) I'd like to say that I never so much as considered her proposition, that I made some grand pronouncement along the lines of *Whither I goeth, this kitten shall go too*.

But I did consider it.

I even told myself it might be better for Homer in the long run. One of the biggest challenges for a blind cat was getting to know the space he lived in. A sudden move to a new home would be a big jolt for him. He knew Melissa's home intimately, and she was likely to stay there for a while.

It took him all of forty-eight hours to figure out his way around Melissa's house, I told myself. If you don't want to take him with you, that's one thing—but don't pretend it's because you think he'd be traumatized by a new place.

I spent the next few days hoping for some kind of epiphany, for a crystalline moment of insight and clarity that would show me what, precisely, was the right thing to do.

It was a moment that never came. Instead, I found myself more aware of small things—of the way, for example, I was the only one who could tell when Homer was deeply asleep, as opposed to half awake, by the slight tension of the muscles in his face that would have controlled his eyelids. A sudden gust of air would also cause

those muscles to contract, closing eyelids that weren't there to protect the eyes he didn't have.

I noticed how Homer was never content merely to lie next to me. If he wanted to sleep beside me, he would press his face against the top of the outside of my thigh, then turn his head slightly and slide all the way down to my knee, the rest of his body following behind so that, by the time he had settled into his sleeping position, he was wedged as tightly against me—with as many points of contact between us—as he could possibly achieve. If Homer was sleeping on his own, he would curl himself up into the tightest ball he could manage, his tail coiled around his nose and his front paws wrapped around his face. Melissa and I laughed at what looked like somebody who was determined not to allow even the slightest hint of light to disturb his slumber; Homer, of course, wouldn't have been able to detect any light on his face.

But I knew it was because, no matter how reckless he was when he played, Homer always felt vulnerable in sleep. It was only when he was sleeping on or next to me that the tension went out of his sleeping posture, that he might lie on his side with his paws still curled beneath him but not hugged defensively around his body.

I had important decisions to make, but there is no logic in some things. Watching Homer sleep with his paws clutched protectively over what should have been his eyes, my heart would break. *Too late, too late!* I would think, with a degree of pity that seemed unwarranted when he was in one of his more boisterous waking moods. He trusted me, more than he trusted anybody else. Hadn't I committed, not so long ago, to being strong enough to build my life around Homer's goodness? Things would have to be far worse than they were for me to decide that either of us would be better off without the other.

So I was once again back to my impossible situation. I needed a place of my own, but I couldn't afford it. I could afford to live with somebody else, but I couldn't live with somebody else and also live with Homer. I couldn't leave Homer because ...

Because I simply couldn't leave him.

And this is where the moment of epiphany did, finally, kick in.

If I couldn't afford to support myself and Homer given my current career path, then I would simply have to find a more lucrative career. There were skills and interests I'd developed during my nonprofit stint that, surely, would prove valuable in the private sector. I wrote newsletters and press releases and coordinated networking events and volunteer projects and fund-raisers, and I wrangled television and newspaper reporters to cover all of these things. I managed budgets and served as the public face of my organization on many occasions, and I was outgoing and did a pretty good job of interacting with the public in general.

This sounded a lot like the jobs of the friends I had who worked in public relations and event marketing. Even the ones who were still young enough that they earned what was considered an entry-level salary topped my own salary by a good 50 percent.

But I also knew that people hadn't simply walked into those jobs. They'd had marketing or communications majors in college (my own major had been creative writing), and they'd spent summers interning and months freelancing for the kinds of firms they eventually went to work for.

If starting over was what I needed to do, and if interning and taking freelance jobs was what it would take to make that happen, I was willing to do all those things. I was even willing to pick up side jobs bartending or waiting tables at night so that my days would be available to work cheap-to-free until I gained experience and found something permanent.

But that put me right back where I started—because doing all of that, even if I was willing, would put me no closer to being able to afford my own apartment in the short term. This was a plan that could pay off in a year or two, that could make Homer's and my life more stable in the long run, but I needed a new home for us *now*. And that was when I had my second epiphany.

I called my parents.

It cost me something to make that phone call. It cost me a lot, actually. Moving back in with my parents was the break-glass-in-case-of-emergency scenario I hadn't even wanted to consider. Nothing could have felt more like a regression in life. If there's anything that says, *I'm not really a grown-up and I can't really take care of myself*, it's moving back in with your parents.

"Of course you can move back in," my mother said. "And of course you can bring the cats."

I knew this had cost her something, as well. Not only did my parents dislike cats on general principle, they also had two dogs who'd been with my family since I was in high school. Adjustments would have to be made by everybody to make this situation feasible—and by "everybody," I didn't just mean the cats and dogs.

"Are you sure this is okay?" I asked my mother. "I know you guys don't really like cats."

"We love you," my mother replied, "and you love the cats." Then she laughed and said, "Besides, if you think living with cats is the biggest sacrifice your father and I have made as parents, you don't know what being a parent means."

Maybe not. But I was starting to get an inkling.



8 • The Ballad of El Mochó

Bless my heart, how he gets honoured and makes friends
whatever city or country he visits.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

EVEN WITHOUT THE CATS, MOVING BACK IN WITH MY PARENTS WOULD have been an enormous adjustment. Would they treat me like I was still in high school, questioning me every time I went out and inquiring about who I was meeting and when I'd be back? Would they attempt to exercise parental authority over things like the tidiness of my bedroom?

Adding the cats to the mix would make things even more complicated. I wanted to figure out practical ways to keep the cats out of my parents' way, and to keep the cats and dogs separated from each other, while still allowing everybody as much liberty as possible. Throw in all the standard confusion involved in a move—boxes to be unpacked, closets and shelves to be stocked, items to be sorted through and placed in storage—and it was clear that, ideally, there would be a time buffer of a couple of weeks between the day I arrived back on my parents' doorstep and the day the cats joined me.

So I decided to make my second difficult phone call in as many weeks. I called Jorge.

Jorge still lived in the home we'd shared when Scarlett and Vashti were adopted. The two of them knew the house, and they also knew Jorge. Homer didn't know either, but Jorge was part of a large extended family that was, collectively, even crazier about animals than I was. He'd grown up with more cats, dogs, birds, gerbils, hamsters, and goldfish than anybody I'd met.

We had communicated a few times since the breakup, in that strained and awkward way you end up talking to your ex during the early weeks after you're no longer together—when your argument is, *Hey, we can still be friends*. Such conversations had decreased as the months went by. I never ended one without a strong sense of remembering why it was we'd broken up in the first place. I was positive Jorge felt the same way.

Nevertheless, if somebody had asked me to name the one person I would have trusted with my cats if I were unable to take care of them, I would have named Jorge without hesitation.

Jorge was more than accommodating when I pitched the idea of having the three cats stay with him for two weeks while I got things set up at my parents' house. "I'd love to see Scarlett and Vashti again," he said. "And I'll take good care of Homer."

I gave Jorge the basic rundown of Homer dos and don'ts ("My advice to you: Don't keep tuna in your house while he's there") and some new issues that had cropped up in the past few months. It turned out that moist cat food gave Homer tremendous gas—it was astounding that one small kitten could produce such huge, horrible smells—but Vashti had been through a recent bout of colitis and was temporarily off dry food, making feedings more complicated than they used to be. I promised to stock Jorge with everything he'd need to care for the cats, as well as some written instructions.

My only concern was how Homer would bear the separation. He hadn't been apart from me for so much as twenty-four hours in the six months since I'd brought him home. The day I dropped the cats

with Jorge, I pretended to leave something behind half a dozen times so I could run back and peek in on him before driving off. The last time I tried it, mumbling something about a lipstick I *was positive* had tumbled out of my purse, Jorge said in exasperation, “Go! I’ve been taking care of cats longer than you have. We’ll be fine.”

I waited two days before going over again to check on everybody, although I called Jorge nightly to ask how the cats were doing, particularly Homer. “He’s fine,” Jorge told me. “He’s having a great time here, actually.”

I soon discovered why. When I arrived at Jorge’s house for my first visit, the first thing I saw was one of Jorge’s friends with a palm high in the air, upon which Homer rested on his belly, all four legs dangling down. Jorge’s friend was spinning Homer around and around rapidly, making airplane noises as he spun.

“Jesus Christ!” I exclaimed. “Are you *crazy? Put him down now!*”

Jorge’s friend, looking both startled and shamefaced, hastily complied. Homer staggered, punch drunk, for a moment (as well he should), but after recovering his balance he stretched his front paws beseechingly up the side of Jorge’s friend’s leg. *Again! Again!*

“You see? He loves it!” Jorge’s friend insisted proudly. Then, affecting the mock-deep intonations of a wrestling announcer, he added, “For he is *El Mocho*, the cat without fear!”

I raised an eyebrow at Jorge. “*El Mocho*? Is this what we’re calling him now?”

Jorge grinned and shrugged. “Well, you know how these things take on a life of their own.”

Mocho was a Spanish word that meant *maimed* or referred to something that had been lopped off like a stump. To call Homer *el mocho* was, essentially, to call him “Stumpy” or “the maimed one.”

It doesn’t sound particularly flattering, but among Spanish speakers the giving of nicknames is tantamount to a declaration of

love. Things that would sound insulting outright in English were tokens of deep affection when said in Spanish.

“He likes his new name,” Jorge’s friend chimed in. “Watch this. *Ven aca, Mochito*.” Homer’s ears pricked up and he trotted right over to Jorge’s friend, sitting on his haunches at full attention.

“Oh, Homer,” I said mournfully. “Have a little dignity.”

“He has nothing but dignity,” Jorge’s friend protested, his eyes alight with humor. “He is *El Mocho*. It is the code of *El Mocho* to meet all opponents with dignity and honor on the field of battle.”

Even I had to laugh at that one.

Homer adjusted to Jorge’s home with an enthusiasm I found almost unsettling. Jorge reported that, after the first day or so, Homer was able to find his way around without bumping into anything. And he absolutely adored Jorge’s friends, all of whom insisted on calling him *El Mocho*.

Homer had been used to living with a bunch of girls, none of whom—as it turned out—were willing to play as rough-and-tumble with him as he would have liked. Jorge and his friends were more than happy to chase Homer around the furniture in elaborate games of tag, which ended when Homer sprang out from under a bed or behind a table leg to attack their ankles. They tossed and spun him a good six feet in the air (I learned of this later, because after that first incident they were careful not to do it when I was around), or flipped him onto his back and wrestled him around. During one visit, I noticed that Homer, as soon as a couple of Jorge’s friends walked in, rolled immediately onto his back and pawed frantically at the air with one leg, in a posture that practically begged, *C’món ... rough me up!*

“He walks around the house at night crying,” Jorge told me after the first week. “He won’t sleep with me. He’ll only sleep near Scarlett. I think he misses you.”

I felt a twinge of guilt—although, I’m ashamed to admit, it was reassuring to receive some small sign that Homer missed me, at least a little.

“And where’s Scarlett sleeping?” I asked.

“Anywhere I’m not.” Jorge gave a rueful laugh. “You’re the only one she was ever friendly to.”

“One more week,” I said. “I promise.”

But the cats wouldn’t end up staying at Jorge’s house another week. On day nine, I got a call from him. “Somebody’s been peeing all over the house,” he said.

“Hey, I’ve told you for years that you shouldn’t let your friends drink all that light beer.”

“I’m serious, Gwen.”

I sighed. “All right, I’m sorry. Which one and where?”

“I haven’t caught anybody in the act, but whoever it is peed on the sofa, my laundry bag with all my clothes in it, and my new leather jacket.” He paused. “I think it’s Scarlett.”

“It’s not Scarlett,” I responded immediately. “It’s Vashti.”

“Has she done this before?” He sounded annoyed, and I could tell he was wondering why, with all the minutiae I’d prepped him with beforehand, I hadn’t bothered to mention this small problem.

“No, she hasn’t. But I’m sure it’s her.”

“If she hasn’t done it before, how can you be sure?”

“A mother knows,” I said wryly.

It was a simple process of elimination, really. I knew why Jorge thought it was Scarlett—because Scarlett, as I mentioned earlier, had a definite perception problem on account of her unfriendliness. Scarlett was so “mean” that, presumably, she was exactly the kind of cat who would pee with abandon all over somebody’s house out of pure malice.

But Scarlett, mean though she was (to other people), was fastidious about her litter box. There were minimum acceptable standards of cleanliness, specific brands of litter that had to be provided, and a modicum of privacy that she absolutely insisted

upon. I couldn't imagine her doing anything as *plebeian* as urinating out in the open like some common street cat.

As for Homer, this was clearly a spite peeing—Homer didn't even have a concept of spite.

That left Vashti. And it made sense, when I thought about it. Vashti had been the worst off of any of them when I'd taken her in. Homer and Scarlett had come to my home after spending days at the vet's office, where they'd been treated and fed before being sent to their new family. Vashti had been found by a co-worker of my mother's at the elementary school where she taught. They'd locked her in a toolshed to keep her from wandering off while my mother did the only thing she could think of to do for a kitten. She called me.

I'd gone down to my mother's school on my lunch break, stopping at the pet store for a small carrier and some Similac, and brought Vashti back to my office. I'd honestly thought, that first day, that Vashti's pink nose was black, so encrusted was it with dirt. Through the bald patches on her skin that the mange had left, I could feel her bones poking through, and her ears were bloody and swollen from ear mites. I'd kept Vashti warm on my lap throughout the afternoon, feeding her the Similac through a dropper, until I was able to get her to the vet's office that evening. She'd come home to live with us the following morning.

In a way that was different from Scarlett and Homer, who'd come to me through other hands, I think Vashti truly believed I'd saved her life. It was Vashti who always gazed at me with undiluted hero-worship in her eyes. I hadn't considered the difficulties she might face in being left at Jorge's house, which was the first home she'd ever known. Insofar as I was her "mother," Jorge was her "father." We had adopted her together, and I knew he loved her.

Vashti loved him, too. But after one too many visits to Jorge's house, when I'd ended up leaving without her, something must have clicked in Vashti's mind. She must have thought she'd been taken

back to Jorge's and left there forever, that I was never going to live with her again.

My guess was that Vashti was sending a message. And the message was: *I'm not living anywhere without Mommy.*

My suspicions were confirmed the next day when Jorge called to tell me he'd caught Vashti in the act of peeing on his stove. Since she had failed to communicate her point the first few times—as evidenced by the fact that she was still with Jorge and not with me—she'd obviously decided to escalate matters. I marveled at the idea of Vashti jumping all the way up to the counter-top stove—Vashti who, to my knowledge, had never once jumped half that height in her entire life.

"I'm sorry," Jorge told me, "but she has to go."

"I'll come get them tonight," I replied.

Loading the cats into their carriers was never an easy task, but for once Vashti climbed in as eagerly as if she were crawling into my lap. I put Homer in last; since he couldn't see the carriers, he didn't run and hide the second they were brought out. He spent his last few minutes in Jorge's house playing with Jorge's friends, charter members of the *El Mocho* fan club, who'd come to see him off. They held small bits of the tuna Jorge hadn't been able to resist buying high in the air, encouraging Homer to leap straight up and grab the tuna from their fingers. "*¡Salta, Mochito!*" (*Salta* being Spanish for *jump*). As I deposited Homer into his carrier, Jorge's friends cried, "No, no! The other two, they can go, but *El Mocho* can stay!"

"You know, he *is* welcome to stay if that would make things easier for you," Jorge said.

For a kitten nobody had wanted, the offers to take Homer off my hands certainly seemed to be piling up.

"Sorry, guys," I said. "They're a package deal."

"There really is something special about that cat," Jorge observed fondly, giving Homer one last rub behind the ears before I zipped the carrier closed around him.

I smiled. “Let’s hope my parents feel the same way.”

The one profitable outcome of this episode in Homer’s life (I use the word *profitable* loosely, because I practically bankrupted myself repaying Jorge for the damage Vashti caused) was that I was decidedly less anxious about Homer’s ability to adjust to life in my parents’ house. With all the concerns I had for Homer over the years, I never again worried about his ability to adapt to new spaces and new people. Even my parents’ dogs no longer felt like the impassable barrier to Homer’s happiness I had been agonizing over.

For he was *El Mocho*, The Cat Without Fear.

¡Viva El Mocho!



9 • “Dogs and Cats, Living Together ...”

There is nothing dearer to a man than his own country and his own parents, and however splendid a home he may have elsewhere, if it be far from his father or mother, he does not care about it.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

PERHAPS SAYING EARLIER THAT MY PARENTS DIDN'T LIKE CATS WAS AN unfair characterization. It would be more accurate to say that my father, who owned his own medical auditing business, wasn't so much anti-cat as he was staunchly pro-dog. But he was also more sensitive when it came to animals generally than just about anybody else I knew. He was one of those people with an ability to understand and respond to an animal's emotional state that went beyond simple compassion and seemed almost to be direct communion. Of all the stray, abused, and abandoned dogs that had come through our home over the years, there had never been one—no matter how traumatized or skittish—who had failed to melt into warm affection in my father's presence, even if that warmth was reserved for my father alone. It was my father I'd always thought of when I'd volunteered at animal shelters, hoping to capture at least some of whatever mysterious ability he had.

My mother, on the other hand, when she was a small child had seen a cat kill a bird. She, too, was capable of deep compassion where just about any animal was concerned, but the trauma of this single act of feline ornicide had left her, as she put it, incapable of emotionally investing in cats the way she could in dogs.

“Cats aren’t loving and loyal the way dogs are,” she’d say. Upon hearing my own cats indirectly maligned in this fashion, I was tempted to ask her what exactly, in her zero years of cat companionship, qualified her to make such an assessment.

Remembering the fruitless dinner-table political arguments of my adolescence, however, I forbore. I considered this forbearance a mark of the maturity I’d attained since I’d last lived with my parents.

That my parents were willing to take the four of us in, despite their antipathy toward cats, was a testament to how much they were willing to do for me—even though we weren’t as close at that time as, perhaps, we could have been. It wasn’t so much that there was any overt hostility between my parents and me; but, where some of my friends had drifted with seeming effortlessness into adult relationships with their parents, my own parents and I were still figuring it out. I often thought I heard a distinct grown-up-talking-to-a-child tone when they spoke to me—and, as it was uncomfortably close to some of my own darker insecurities about myself, I resented it accordingly.

More than anything else, I wanted to make them proud of me. But it didn’t seem as if I’d done much in my post-college life thus far to inspire pride, unless you counted one major failed relationship and being broke enough to require my moving back in with them.

But my parents were willing to take the four of us in, and they were even willing to divide their house into “cat zones” and “dog zones.” Casey, a yellow Lab mix, and Brandi, a miniature cocker spaniel, had been with my family since I was a teenager. They were always giddily thrilled whenever I turned up at my parents’ for a visit, following me closely and looking doleful if I so much as

walked past the front door, anticipating the moment when I would leave and not return for days or weeks. If I spent the night, the two of them would pile into bed with me, as they'd done when I was still in high school.

Once I'd been living in my parents' house again for a week and change, the novelty of having me around wore off a bit and they weren't so apt to follow me *everywhere*. This was something I'd counted on; conflicting demands on my time and attention from the dog and cat camps wouldn't engender the kind of mutual goodwill I was hoping for.

But I realized there was only so far diplomacy would go. Cat/dog animosity was at least as old as history itself, and neither my cats nor my parents' dogs had ever been called upon to share quarters with members of the opposing faction. Remembering the dictum that "good fences make good neighbors," my parents and I retrieved the folding wooden childproof gates from the storage spot they'd occupied since my younger sister and I were toddlers. "I knew we'd end up using them again," my mother said, although not without tossing me a glance that added, *Of course, I thought we'd be using them for our grand-children.*

The gates attached to the walls with suction cups and reached about waist-high on the average adult. We put them up where a hallway split off to my bedroom and another bedroom, connected by an adjoining bathroom—effectively creating a three-room apartment that the dogs would be unable to access. I conducted a rigorous cleaning—trying to eliminate as much anxiety-inducing dog smell as I could—then installed cat beds, scratching posts, litter box, and food and water bowls. The cats' new home was complete.

"What do you guys think?" I asked the cats when I brought them in for the first time.

Scarlett and Vashti crept forward cautiously from the safety of their carriers, noses to the ground and ears at full attention. Casey barked in the other room, and they immediately scrambled under the bed. It was two hours before I could get them to do more than

peek their whiskers out through the bed's eyeleted dust ruffle, a relic of my preteen years.

Homer was unfazed, however. His ears flicked momentarily at Casey's barking, but he was more interested in exploring what was in front of him. Homer had never encountered anything with the texture of the '70s-style shag carpeting in my childhood bedroom. He spent a few minutes stalking carefully through the carpet strands that reached halfway to his chin—a black panther in perfect miniature prowling an electric-blue savanna. Once he realized the superior traction carpet afforded, far better than the hardwood or tile floors he was used to, Homer took off at a run, racing in blurred circles around the room and bouncing off walls and furniture like a rubber ball fired from a slingshot. *Yippee! Look how fast I can go in here!*

“He’s a little nut, isn’t he?” my mother, who hadn’t been able to resist a quick peek, observed.

“You have no idea,” I replied.

• • •

DESPITE SOME OF the concerns I’d had before moving in, my parents didn’t unduly interfere with my day-to-day activities. I did tend to let them know, as I was walking out the door, where I was going and approximately when I’d be back, but it was a level of basic courtesy that I would have extended to friendly roommates. The majority of my friends still lived on South Beach, and there were inevitable late nights, but my parents refrained from asking intrusive questions.

What I hadn’t counted on ahead of time was being on the receiving end of their parenting advice when it came to the cats.

“I don’t think you’re giving them fresh water often enough,” my mother announced one afternoon, a few weeks after we’d moved in. “I checked in on them while you were out, and poor Vashti was standing next to her water bowl making such sad eyes at me. I

refilled it for her and the poor thing acted like she hadn't seen clean water in days."

I *always* changed the cats' water twice daily—once in the morning and once in the evening. And "poor Vashti" was something of a con artist when it came to her water bowl. Vashti was a cat who, oddly enough, was obsessed with water. She loved to hold her paws under running faucets, immerse them up to her shoulder joint in full drinking glasses, and roll around in recently used showers while the tile was still wet. The refilling of her water bowl was one of the high points of her day; the beguiling roll of water caused by setting a full bowl on the ground mesmerized her, and she gave me no peace most mornings until I'd re-created this daily miracle for her.

I was about to explain this to my mother when a new thought occurred to me. "Wait a second—what were you doing with them in the first place?"

"Well, I wanted to say hello to Vashti," my mother replied. She emphasized Vashti's name in a way that meant there was a difference between *cats*, which she didn't care for, and *Vashti*, who merited a degree of interest. "I *am* the one who found her when she was a kitten."

"Yes, you did." I smiled. "And you sent her to a good home, one where she gets all the fresh water she needs."

A few days later, my father piped up with a suggestion of his own. "I don't think the cats have enough toys," he said. My father was the kind of indulgent dad who brought new toys home for the dogs every few days, to the point that my parents' otherwise immaculate house looked like a chewtoy graveyard. "You should buy more toys for them."

"They're not like the dogs, Dad," I explained. "They're not into store-bought toys." This was true, with the exception of that stuffed worm Homer still loved dearly. The bag that new toys came in was always an adventure—a large paper bag made an excellent cat fort. The receipt for the toys could be crumpled up into a ball that a cat could bat around and chase. The plastic wrapping around the toys

was a bonanza for Scarlett, who loved nothing more than licking plastic wrap. (If a genie were to grant me the wish of the cats' being able to talk for a single day, the first question I would ask is, *What's so great about licking plastic bags?!*) But the toys themselves held little interest for my brood.

"You should really do something about Scarlett," my mother said once. This was after she had found me reading a book with a purring Scarlett curled in my lap. She'd held out her hand and Scarlett sniffed it. Taking this as encouragement, my mother had attempted to pet Scarlett, who had hissed and recoiled from my mother's touch so forcefully that her head nearly bruised my breastbone. "Brandi used to be afraid of new people, and look how well she does now."

"Scarlett isn't afraid of people, Mom," I told her. "Scarlett *doesn't like* people."

The problem could be summed up in a nutshell: My parents were trying to dog my cats. Having never spent much time around cats, they tried to take the accumulated knowledge of more than three decades of dog ownership and apply it to these strange new creatures who now inhabited their home. To the extent that the cats' reactions differed from a dog's, it was most likely because I didn't yet have enough experience being responsible for pets.

I tried to weather their input with good grace, but it was hard. I was my parents' child, reflexively defensive at any perceived parental criticism. I was also my "children's" parent, bristling instantly at the slightest implication that I wasn't caring for them properly, or that they were anything other than exactly what they should be.

But the one thing I could plainly see—that touched me, even though I was never very good at articulating it—was that my parents were trying. They were trying to care about the cats, to interest themselves in their happiness and well-being.

I had worried that my parents would treat me like a child. Maybe, in talking to me about being a parent, they were trying the best way

they knew how to treat me like an adult.

IT WAS ONLY when it came to Homer that my parents were abashed to offer advice or constructive criticism. This was understandable. The idea of a pet who was blind—and not just blind, but eyeless—was far enough beyond their experience to feel exotic and mysterious. They often observed that, “you *do* seem to understand him,” and left it at that.

Homer initially inspired more pity in my parents than anything else. The most frustrating fact of life for Homer in my parents’ home was that he was confined to only a few rooms—rooms I wasn’t necessarily in when I was in the house. Homer would sit at the childproof gate and wail piteously if he heard me talking in the kitchen or down the hall.

“Poor baby,” my mother would say, real empathy in her voice. “Life must be so hard for him.”

It wasn’t life that Homer found hard to bear, of course. It was his enforced separation from me and from the other human voices he could hear but never meet. Homer didn’t understand a world in which I was present but not with him, in which there were other people who didn’t exist solely to befriend and play with him.

It wasn’t long into our stay before Homer made his first daring escape from behind the childproof gate. I customarily slid it open just far enough to allow myself entry to or exit from the cat-designated portion of the house. One day, as I was entering, Homer sort of flattened himself sideways and pressed through the mere inches of space between my leg and the wall, like toothpaste being squeezed from a tube. He didn’t get very far that time; being unfamiliar with the layout of my parents’ house, he stopped to get his bearings after only a few feet.

That was the first time.

Homer was impossible to contain after that. I tried to prevent him from squeezing past me by climbing over the gate rather than

opening it, but that just gave Homer the idea of jumping over it himself. Vashti and Scarlett could have jumped over the gate all along, but the two of them didn't especially like to jump—nor were they anxious to encounter the dogs who dwelled on the other side of that gate. Homer had no such compunctions. The only thing holding him back had been his belief that unable to see the gate's true dimensions, it must have stretched all the way up to infinity. Once he realized its actual height was more like three feet, there was no stopping him.

My parents, as so many before them, were astounded at how quickly Homer learned his way around their home. A sharp right turn out of (or over) the gate brought him into the main hallway. An equally sharp left turn, precisely fifteen full-tilt gallops down, brought him into the living room. A couch to the left of the living room's entry was flush against the wall and a cinch to climb. Four or five steps along the top of it and he could clamber down behind an end table—wedged in a corner between the couch and a love seat—and hunker down into a spot where it was impossible for humans to follow and catch him. Although, while I was reaching for him over and around the couch, it was easy enough to dart through the legs of the end table, up the side of the love seat, back down onto the ground behind me, and off to farther points unknown.

"That cat's a *meshugana!*" my mother always said in a kind of wonder upon witnessing Homer's feats of speed, dexterity, and *chutzpah*.

"It shouldn't be this hard to catch a blind kitten," my father, gasping slightly, insisted after a chase that had taken him all the way down the other main hall, into my parents' bedroom, under and over their bed, and had finally culminated atop my mother's vanity.

In this way, it became inevitable that Homer's daring would bring him face-to-face with Casey and Brandi. Like Odysseus encountering Cyclopes and Sirens, Homer one day came upon these foreign and heretofore undreamed-of beasts for the very first time.

Casey was a fairly large and tightly muscled dog, although also extraordinarily gentle. Upon running into her (literally) for the first time, Homer didn't hiss and flee the way Scarlett and Vashti did whenever they thought Casey had strayed too close to the gate separating them. Homer puffed himself up as far as his hair follicles would allow and crouched down defensively, his nostrils going wild as he inhaled and processed Casey's dog smell. *What the heck is this thing?* His attempt to make himself appear bigger to Casey, who weighed more than eighty pounds, would have been comical if I didn't realize how scared he must be.

Homer reached out one tiny, tentative paw to touch Casey's nose and face. I hovered a few inches away, ready to snatch Homer up at the first sign of growls or aggression. Casey sniffed him with great interest as Homer stood stock-still, almost holding his breath. Then Casey's enormous pink tongue, bigger than Homer's whole head, descended onto his face. Homer's facial muscles contracted, and I knew if he'd had eyelids they would have been screwed shut to protect sensitive areas from this sudden assault of rough wetness. Undeterred by his obvious reluctance, Casey began to lick and groom him methodically.

I don't think Homer cared very much for being groomed by Casey, but he didn't have much choice in the matter if he was unfortunate enough to wind up trapped beneath one of her large paws, which Casey employed to keep a squirming Homer in place while she licked him "clean" from top to bottom. If I wasn't there to separate them, a thoroughly rumpled Homer would end up drenched in dog saliva and spend the next half hour indignantly licking himself free of its odor.

No matter how well you think you understand a pet, there's always a level on which the workings of their mind remains a mystery. I couldn't tell you how Casey, who was intensely loyal to our entire family, understood that Homer—a *cat*—was one of us. But she did. When Homer reached seven months of age and was brought to the vet to be neutered, Casey, according to my parents, sat at the front door and howled for twenty minutes after Homer

was taken off in his carrier. When Homer returned, it was Casey who spent two full days guarding the gate that separated her from a groggy, stitched-up Homer. If a car outside backfired or the mailman rang the doorbell, Casey—who had never been anything but affectionate with everybody she'd ever met—raised her hackles and issued a low growl of warning. Whenever Homer turned or whimpered in his sleep during this recovery phase, Casey would yelp an alert, a signal that meant I really ought to check on him.

It took Brandi a bit longer to warm up to Homer. Brandi had a favorite habit of hiding the dog treats my parents gave her in various corners throughout the house. It was infuriating to her that Homer unfailingly sniffed out each and every one of them with the tenacity of a bloodhound. But Brandi was a playful little thing, as was Homer, and she soon discovered the joys of having a playmate who didn't tower over her the way Casey did.

The two of them killed many an hour chasing each other throughout the house, and soon Brandi was even sharing some of her treats with Homer. Her favorite food was baby carrots, and she'd bring them to Homer by the dozen, dropping them at his feet with a wagging tail. She could never understand why Homer's only interest in the carrots was to bat them around and chase after them. Who didn't love eating baby carrots? When Homer would fling them down the hall with his paw, Brandi retrieved them with great patience, depositing them in front of Homer once again and even taking a small bite as if to show him what he was missing. *See? They're for eating, not playing.*

Homer's frequent escapes also brought him into closer contact with my parents. Soon enough, it wasn't unusual for me to come home in the evening to find Homer purring on the couch next to my mother while she stroked his back and worked on a crossword puzzle or watched an old movie. "He looks so comfortable," she would say, almost apologetically. "I didn't want to disturb him."

And I would catch my father awkwardly petting Homer—realizing that the way cats like to be petted is different from dogs, and doing

his best to smooth Homer's fur in an even, soothing fashion. "Who's a good boy? Who's such a good boy?"

Homer often brought his stuffed worm along with him when he engineered one of his breakouts, the Bonnie to his Clyde. It became a featured player in his interactions with my father. Homer would toss the stuffed worm up into the air, his head tilted at a slight angle as he listened for the bell in its tail to hit the ground and jingle its precise location. Then he'd pounce on it ferociously, turning onto his back with the worm clutched between his front paws while he kicked at it frantically with his hind legs, as if to indicate the worm was putting up a fierce struggle. Having finally "subdued" the bedraggled thing, he would carry it over to my father and drop it at his feet—sitting eagerly in a posture that suggested he was waiting for my father to throw the worm across the room so Homer could wrestle it into submission and bring it over to him once again.

"He wants to play fetch with me!" my father would say, as if this dog-like behavior was a revelatory code understood only between the two of them.

It was during one of these games of fetch, a couple of months after Homer was neutered, that my father turned to me and said, "You did a good thing, you know." He threw the worm for Homer to catch and, as he watched Homer tear across the room, he said it again. "You did a good thing for this cat."

My eyes, quite unexpectedly, filled with tears.

"Thanks, Dad," I said.



10 • Running on Faith

I saw Sisyphus at his endless task, raising his prodigious stone with both his hands. Straining with hands and feet, he tried to roll it up to the top of the hill, but always, just before he could roll it over onto the other side, the pitiless stone would come thundering down. Then he would begin trying to push it uphill again.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

I WORKED HARD OVER THE NEXT YEAR AND A HALF, STARTING OVER again at the entry level career-wise. I worked internships, freelance jobs, low-paying jobs, no-paying jobs, and anything else that had the slightest chance of adding another line of experience to my résumé. To augment my alarmingly slim earnings, I took additional work tending bar at some of South Beach's more upscale hotels and restaurants—the kinds of places that were likely to close at two AM rather than five AM, granting me a decent shot of at least a few hours' sleep before once again pounding the pavement the following morning.

There were moments of great optimism—a three-month freelance gig with one of the most prestigious PR firms in Miami, which I hoped would eventually lead to a full-time position; a job assisting in marketing and publicity for a cabaret series of legendary Broadway stars that ran on Miami Beach. I even helped out with fund-raising events and press opportunities on behalf of some of the

nonprofit organizations I'd cultivated relationships with over the years, this time working in a PR capacity rather than an administrative one.

But there were also days when I felt profoundly discouraged. Full-time PR positions in Miami weren't as plentiful as I'd hoped, and my short-term jobs tended to end as soon as the project I was working on did. Sometimes I told myself that the whole idea of a career change had been a foolish one, that it was obviously impossible for me to start over and actually be successful, even in the very narrow terms by which I would have defined success (i.e., being able to pay rent on a smallish, reasonably well-located apartment). I seemed to have nothing but friends of about my own age with exciting careers and great apartments, who had assistants and expense accounts or who were making down payments on their first condos or houses. There were times when I arrived home so exhausted I could cry, with nothing more to show for my day's efforts than the bag of catnip I'd picked up on the way home for Scarlett, Vashti, and Homer.

Homer, by now, had officially transitioned from kittenhood into a full-grown adult cat—although he'd stopped growing around the time he was neutered at seven months, weighing in at a slight three pounds. Homer wasn't short so much as he was narrow and delicate of bone structure. He was lean and sleek, and he walked with a sinuous, leonine grace. When carrying his stuffed worm, Homer would clamp his jaws around what would have been its neck, allowing the rest of its body to dangle between exquisitely formed, exquisitely tiny front paws, making him look like a very small and very dark tiger dragging home a fresh kill. His fur was always groomed to such a high gloss that he seemed to cast light instead of a shadow. Lying in a patch of sunlight, its blackness gleamed cobalt. In repose he was like a sculptor's vision of the archetype of a cat, chiseled in perfect black marble.

He was still active to the point of hyperactivity, still in love with running in circles and bouncing off the walls, causing my mother to refer to him affectionately as "a little goofball." He still loved to

leap, climb, and explore. But whereas he used to do these things with the reckless imprecision of one who might miss his mark but doesn't care, Homer now moved with the supreme physical confidence of one who knows that falls and failures simply aren't possible—like a ballet dancer who, after years of training, doesn't have to think about how to land flawlessly.

It was Homer's confidence that, in my most disheartened moments, also made me feel the most ashamed of myself. Wasn't Homer the cat who wasn't supposed to be able to do anything? To meet new challenges or be independent? Wasn't he the one who'd inspired me once with his willingness to climb as high as he could without knowing exactly how high he was going, or how he would get back down? Every leap Homer took was a leap of faith. Homer was living proof of the adage that fortune favors the brave, that just because you couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel didn't mean it wasn't there.

I remembered how, when I'd met Homer for the first time, I'd been impressed with the idea that it was possible to have something within yourself that was strong enough to persevere no matter what. It was an idea that kept me going, even when professionals in my chosen field told me that I had the wrong kind of background and not enough experience, and that despite having a talent for the work, it would be years before I'd land the kind of permanent position I was hoping for. I would struggle against a feeling of panic—if I couldn't support myself doing this, and I couldn't support myself doing what I'd done before, then what was I going to do? *Screw that*, I would think grimly, and there was comfort in the thought. *Nobody could tell Homer what his potential was, and they can't tell me.*

One of the best things I could do to advance my own cause was to make new friends and network. Who knew where word of a great job opening might come from? But I sometimes hated meeting new people during that time. I never liked to admit that I was living with my parents, and the further disclosure that I had three cats (I had friends who delighted in adding this tidbit to my verbal curriculum

vitae) drew looks of amazement. Three cats might not sound like a lot to any die-hard pet person, but among people my own age in a place like South Beach I was an eccentric. “*Three* cats?” people would say. “*Three*, really?” Even my closest friends sometimes referred to me as “the crazy cat lady,” and I could tell that newcomers were mentally deciding there was nothing less sexy than a twenty-seven-year-old girl who lived with her parents and was, apparently, some kind of fanatical cat collector.

“Well, the first two were planned,” I’d say in a breezy fashion. “The third one was an accident.” This naturally led to descriptions of Homer and his “special circumstances,” always to an enraptured audience. Inevitably, they would ask if Homer could get around on his own, whether he was able to find food and litter, and then they’d speculate about how unhappy an eyeless cat must surely be. Some would even add, probably not meaning to be unkind, that it might have been better had Homer been put to sleep as a kitten.

Something inside me would flare up at such displays of ignorance, but ignorance was better fought with education than anger. “He’s a terror,” I would tell these people, with enormous pride. “You’ve never seen such a sure-footed ball of energy in your life.” I had vowed not to be the person who talked too much about her cats, not wanting to be the crazy cat lady people suspected me of being. But as soon as I had recounted one of Homer’s adventures, listeners wanted to hear more, and then even more.

I tried to remain upbeat during this period in my life, although it often wasn’t easy. Homer could sense when my mood was down. He always paid such close attention to the sound of my voice, listening for the slightest changes in pitch and cadence, and he knew the difference between how I sounded when I was happy, and how I sounded when I was only pretending to be. He didn’t scamper about the way he normally did, choosing instead to rub his face hard against my chin and neck or curl up with me in a spoon position, burrowing as tightly as he could into my midsection, as if he knew my core was where I felt the most hollow. “If it weren’t for you I wouldn’t be in this mess, you know,” I’d say, only half joking.

Homer would crane his neck around to lick my nose with his raspy tongue, purring all the louder.

Sometimes it's possible to know two completely contradictory things at the same time, and to believe with equal certainty that both of them are true. I knew that I loved Homer to an extent that frightened me, that if somebody could wave a magic wand and give me a million dollars tomorrow in exchange for Homer, I wouldn't so much as consider taking the deal.

But I also knew that I'd ended up changing my life for him far more than I had anticipated the day I adopted him. I wanted a life with Homer—a life that afforded him absolute safety and freedom in a home of our own. But I also wanted to have the kind of life most of the friends my age had, the kind that was only semi-responsible—where I paid my bills on time and was conscientious about my job, but beyond that was just a kid in my twenties, throwing parties in my apartment and dating a succession of inappropriate, but nevertheless entertaining, men.

Perhaps that was why, on occasion, I lost my temper with Homer. If I came home after an eighteen-hour day, for example, to find that he'd broken some treasured knickknack I'd placed on a shelf I'd believed too high for him to reach; or if I discovered that he'd tossed half a bowl's worth of cat food from its dish into the water bowl—food I'd paid for out of the virtual nothing I scraped by on after putting money into savings for the home we would someday have, food that was wasted and that clotted up the water so Scarlett and Vashti had nothing to drink all day.

My parents, still half convinced by Vashti's shenanigans that I wasn't changing the cats' water frequently enough, would sometimes sneak into my room while I was out and refill the water bowl for them—never remembering to place it far enough away from the food bowl to prevent these incidents. "You have to separate the bowls," I'd remind them, in a tone I meant to be patient but that, when I heard it aloud, sounded anything but. I emphasized the word *separate* and held my hands wide apart, as if I thought visual cues were the only way to drive this point home.

I never yelled at Homer, not wanting to squander the currency I had in being able to stop him in his tracks if he was about to do something dangerous. If I raised my voice too often, about things he couldn't understand and that weren't related to his safety, my authority would, I knew, eventually diminish.

And even at my angriest, I realized he hadn't known he was doing anything wrong, that he was only engaging in the antics I loved him so dearly for most of the time. He couldn't help it if, when exploring a shelf he'd never climbed up to before, he couldn't see that he was about to knock something over and break it. When he was bored, he couldn't sit at a window and watch the world go by the way my other two cats loved to do. Climbing furniture or listening to the sound of food hitting the water kept him entertained, and who was I to begrudge him that?

I never yelled. But when he came bounding over, overjoyed that I was finally home, I would push him brusquely aside. "Why do you have to be so hyper *all the time*?" The tears of frustration that I knew were too ridiculous to allow myself were nonetheless audible in my voice.

Homer didn't understand, but he was perceptive enough to realize I wasn't happy with him at moments like these. He would hang his head and edge toward me meekly, pawing at my leg with a series of anxious *mews*. Nothing put an instant damper on all Homer's joyous high spirits like sensing that I was displeased with him.

Seeing how crushed Homer was always made me feel like a monster. I would relent within a few minutes, reaching down to rub him under his chin and behind his ears. As soon as I touched him, he would crawl into my lap and all over me, unable to purr or nuzzle enough to indicate how ecstatic he was that we were friends again.

"It's not easy being a parent, is it?" my mother said, with a healthy dose of irony, upon finding us in the midst of one of these reconciliations.

“No,” I agreed ruefully. I looked up at her. “I guess I didn’t always make things easy on you and Dad, did I?”

My mother smiled. “No, you didn’t,” she said. “But you got better.”

My parents had fallen hard for Homer by this time. I would hear my father on the phone with friends and business colleagues, boasting of Homer’s latest exploits. “And he’s *blind*,” he’d add at the end of each anecdote, as if he were positive the person on the other end had never, in all his born days, heard of anything so extraordinary as a blind cat who could play fetch or find his way to a can of tuna located all the way at the top of a kitchen counter. My mother loved to compare Homer with her friends’ cats. *He has so much more on the ball than Susan’s cat*, she would say, referring to some cat-owning acquaintance of hers. *Susan’s cat never knows what’s going on*.

“Your father and I always say that if anything were to happen to you, and you couldn’t take care of the cats anymore, we would take Homer,” my mother informed me, out of nowhere, over a Sunday breakfast.

I furrowed my brow quizzically. “Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” my mother replied. She buttered a piece of toast. “I’m just saying if, *God forbid*, something happens ...”

“If something happens like ... *what?*” I repeated. I tried to envision the calamitous accidents and life-threatening illnesses my mother was so obliquely referring to.

Or maybe she meant that I might decide Homer was too much trouble, that I might not *want* to take care of him anymore. Perhaps she and my father were doing that thing parents do—trying to relieve me of a larger responsibility than I should, in their minds, have to cope with at this point in my life. Maybe they were attempting to give me a graceful way out.

In my own childhood, my parents had often snapped at me or lost their tempers in ways I had found inexplicable and bewildering. Sometimes, I thought, you could end up resenting someone in direct

proportion to how important it was to you to make them happy. The resentment was second only to the devastation you would feel if you lost that someone altogether.

Homer and Casey were sitting a few feet away from the breakfast table, side by side, at rigid, rapt attention. They tried not to appear conspicuously as if they were begging, but they were obviously hopeful that a few table scraps might find their way over.

I had referred to Homer as an “accident.” What I believed in my heart, however, was that Homer had been a surprise. An accident was something you would go out of your way to avoid if you had the chance to do things over. A surprise was something you hadn’t even known you’d wanted until you got it.

I clearly wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

“Sorry.” I picked up the front section of the Sunday paper. “You and Dad will just have to find your own cat.”

My mother grimaced. “As if *that* would ever happen.”



11 • A One-Bedroom of One's Own

It rests with heaven to decide who shall be chief among us,
but you shall be master in your own house and over your own
possessions.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

THE DOT-COM REVOLUTION CAME EVENTUALLY TO MIAMI—ALBEIT SEVERAL years later than it had arrived in cities like New York and San Francisco—and with it a sudden surge in job opportunities. Start-up companies set up shop in the aging Deco office buildings of South Beach, with apparently limitless budgets and a need to staff up as quickly as possible. Because most of these companies couldn't fill positions as rapidly as their needs were growing, they required employees who were, in the parlance, able to "wear a lot of different hats."

One company, for example, needed someone to be their director of event marketing, able to produce large-scale corporate events, cocktail parties, and trade shows. Since they didn't have a press representative yet, it would be great if that same person also had a working knowledge of the city's press contacts and how to mobilize them. As they also hadn't yet found a full-time copywriter, it would be helpful if this new hire had a degree in English or creative writing and could pinch-hit with copywriting responsibilities as

necessary. And because the mission of this particular company was to produce a local, online directory replete with information about community activities and volunteer efforts, it would be ideal if they found someone with strong connections in Miami's nonprofit orbit.

"They know they're asking for a lot," the friend who tipped me off to this position told me. "So they're willing to pay a pretty high salary for the right person."

My hands trembled over my computer's keyboard that night as I updated my résumé, so nervous was I that I might submit it too late, or that they might not want me for the position. But I didn't, and they did.

It was just under two years since I had moved back into my parents' house. Finally, after so much time spent in what had often felt like a fruitless struggle, I had attained a job and a salary that would more than cover the bills I already had—plus a place of my own.

EVERY SECOND WHEN I wasn't working over the next couple of months, I devoted to reading real estate listings. I eyed them with the close, loving attention to detail that a shut-in lavishes on reading pornography.

I had never lived in an apartment of my own. After college, I'd moved in with Jorge. After Jorge, I'd lived with Melissa, and then with my parents. So each four-line description in the apartment listings was a window into a glittering, glamorous new life. I could be the fashionable young tenant of a sleek new high-rise on Brickell Avenue, with ocean views, doormen, and concierge service. A converted guesthouse on one of the sprawling older estates on Pine Tree Drive, with palazzo floors and a spiral staircase, would be my entrée to ramshackle bohemia. I could be part of the trendy, cutting-edge set with a garden apartment in Miami's burgeoning Design District. If what I wanted was SoBe cachet, a charming duplex in a restored Art Deco building was the way to go.

I had a price range in mind, but I didn't want to spend all the way to the top of it. One never knew what the future held, but what I knew for certain was that I never wanted to be forced again, for financial reasons, to live with my parents.

There were other considerations as well. Anything on the ground floor—like the Design District garden apartment—struck me as unsafe for a woman living alone. And if Homer were to inadvertently scurry his way out the front door, I didn't want him in a position to run straight out into the street. The gaps between the metal steps in the spiral staircase of that converted guesthouse were dangerous for a small blind cat who could easily, in a fit of playfulness, slip between them and plummet to the ground floor. The balcony of the Brickell Avenue high-rise was a death trap. Homer had no idea that solid ground could end suddenly, and with the speed at which he moved he could be out a balcony door, onto the balcony itself, and over the side in a matter of seconds.

I finally settled on an eleventh-floor, one-bedroom apartment—light-filled and spacious—in a gargantuan complex on South Beach's West Avenue. It didn't convey much in the way of personality or lifestyle, but it was sensibly priced in the middle of my range. The apartment featured walk-in closets, an enormous bathroom that could discreetly accommodate a litter box, and a large balcony with sweeping views of Biscayne Bay to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east.

I had been deeply conflicted at first, wanting that apartment but also worried about Homer and the balcony. But South Florida living was all about taking advantage of our balmy climate, and just about anything that wasn't ground-floor had some sort of balcony or adjoining patio. At least this apartment featured a screen door behind the sliding glass door that led to the balcony. A sliding door was in itself a great safety measure, taking longer to open than a hinged door, which meant I had additional seconds to stop a death-defiant Homer from worming his way past me outside. Even if Homer did manage to slip by, there would be a screen behind the door—one he couldn't squeeze through unless I unlocked it.

The apartment was unfurnished, and I was starting from scratch since I owned nothing beyond my clothes, my books, a small television, and the CDs that had been gathering dust in boxes; I hadn't wanted to revert to my teenage habit of playing loud music in my room and annoying my parents. Here too, though, in selecting the things that would convert my apartment from anonymous rental unit to comfortable home, were countless hours of joy.

I was as mindful of the cats in selecting furniture as I had been in selecting an apartment. They were all good about using scratching posts, but since Homer didn't so much leap to the top of tall furniture as climb it, his claws inevitably found their way into things. A leather sofa was out of the question—too many snags, not enough options for covering them. But a cloth sofa made from too delicate a material was equally impractical. I ended up with a neighbor's red velvet sofa and love seat, which were both appealingly risqué—appropriate, I thought, for the first apartment of my own that I would eventually bring “boys” over to—and made of a fabric surprisingly strong and snag-proof.

A friend suggested declawing Homer, since I was so concerned about the impact of his claws on household furnishings. It was something I couldn't even bring myself to consider. Not only was I opposed to declawing any of my cats, but Homer's claws were too much a part of his sense of confidence. He was so comfortable climbing and leaping in part because, even if he couldn't see that he was about to slide down or tumble backward off something, the quick deployment of his claws would save him from a fall like a mountain climber's grappling hooks.

“I'm going to miss him,” my mother said when our moving day finally arrived. Her eyes were suspiciously bright. “I've really come to love that stupid little cat.”

“Hey!” I protested, but I smiled. “Who are you calling ‘stupid’?”

“Casey and Brandi aren't going to like it,” my father glumly predicted.

I couldn't resist teasing him. "Do you think maybe they'll offer to take care of Homer if, *God forbid*, something happens to me?"

Leaving this time felt different than it had when I'd first left for college. Back then, I'd known I would return for school breaks and summer vacations. There had never been a single, definitive moment of rupture or leave-taking. This time was different, though. This time, we all knew I wasn't coming back.

Returning to live in my parents' home had seemed, at times, like a demoralizing descent back into childhood. All that was already receding, however. Now it struck me that circumstances had brought me closer to my parents, had allowed me to get to know them as an adult in ways I never would have otherwise.

The cats struggled frantically in their carriers as I loaded them into the car. As far as they were concerned, nothing good was ever on the other end of a trip in the carrier. It always meant either a vet visit (bad) or a new home to get used to (even worse).

"This time we're going to a better place," I whispered to them. "You'll love our new home. I promise."

"Call us when you get there," my mother said. She pulled me into a hug. "Maybe we'll bring over bagels or something tomorrow morning, so you don't have to worry about food while you're getting settled."

"That sounds great," I told her, returning the hug.

The last thing I heard, as I shut the car doors behind the cats and prepared to drive away, was the sound of Casey howling from inside the house.



12 • Pet Sounds

A servant presently led in the famous bard Demodocus, whom the muse had dearly loved, but to whom she had given both good and evil, for though she had endowed him with a divine gift of song, she had robbed him of his eyesight.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

HOMER HAD A MILE-LONG TO-DO LIST AS WE SETTLED INTO OUR NEW home. There was a whole new floor plan to memorize, and I ensured that Homer would learn it in relation to his litter box by placing him there first when I released the cats from their carriers. After an hour of hugging the walls as he ran from room to room, he had the layout down cold. There were also new hiding places to be discovered and claimed, new furniture to be climbed and categorized. The apartment was filled with moving boxes, and Homer personally inspected each and every one. He excitedly shredded and tossed paper wrappings, plastic bubble wrap, and Styrofoam popcorn, until the air around him resembled the chum you see in the water after a piranha attack.

Homer loved to climb into the boxes and leap out from them unexpectedly. He had never been as successful at hide-and-seek as he now was with the boxes to provide well-concealed hiding places. He would hunker all the way down, making sure the flap of the box

was closed over his head, and spring out like a Jack-in-the-box when Scarlett or Vashti or I walked past. I don't know if he connected the actual invisibility of hiding in a box with his previous failed attempts at "sneaking" up on the three of us in plain sight. But there was now a satisfaction in the game he'd never found before, and I wound up keeping a few boxes around for weeks after they'd been emptied, unwilling to deprive him of such an easy source of happiness.

Homer also made it his business to greet all deliverymen or phone and cable technicians who passed through our front door. Scarlett and Vashti would hide—Scarlett not caring to meet new people, and Vashti perfectly happy to meet new people but terrified by the noise these men made bumping into things with heavy crates, or rattling metal tools around in a toolbox.

Homer was fascinated by these visitors for the exact reasons, and to the exact degree, that Scarlett and Vashti avoided them. They were new *and* they made interesting sounds! Where Scarlett and Vashti flew from any noise that was too loud or too unusual, Homer was invariably drawn toward it like a compass needle spinning north.

You would think that a blind cat would be more, not less, intimidated by sharp or sudden sounds, that they would be less comprehensible to him than to other cats. But in a world where no sound was expected—where you couldn't see the book about to thud on the floor tumbling from the bookshelf, or the vacuum cleaner that would soon begin its wail being pulled from the closet—then no sound was unexpected, either. Sound, in fact, was the thing that explained most of Homer's world to him. An unanticipated noise, perceived as a potential threat by Vashti and Scarlett, was for Homer one more puzzle piece that made his unseen universe comprehensible. He found comfort in the rhythm and pulse of sound, no matter how jarring or abrasive, the way my other two cats did in silence.

It was Homer's habit to trot closely behind the men who arrived with a clanging metal bed frame or several feet of television cable

that dragged noisily on the floor. Frequently, I had to keep Homer—who was eager to poke his nose and ears into whatever mysterious things they were doing—at heel, so he wouldn't interfere with their work. Most of them would regard him in a friendly enough manner, although the inevitable question always came up after a moment or two of puzzled scrutiny.

“Something happen to your cat's face?”

“He's blind,” I'd answer shortly.

“Aw, poor little guy.” Homer, knowing that this sympathetic tone was directed at him, would leave my side to climb up their legs or jump into their laps. He often dragged along his stuffed worm (whose recovery from the moving boxes he'd been very anxious about), hoping to engage one of these strangers in a game of fetch.

It was a momentous day when I was able to squeeze enough from my paycheck to purchase a stereo system, and the man who delivered and installed it was the deliveryman who had the greatest long-term impact on Homer's life. Homer hadn't been exposed much to music. Once my CDs came out of their boxes and found their way into the new CD player, a further audio vista opened before him. I learned that music had a tremendous impact on Homer's moods. Anything with a hard, driving tempo—rock or clubby dance music, for instance—sent him into a tizzy. Hole's *Live Through This* made him hyper almost beyond the telling of it. He'd tear around the living room, leaping manically on and off the couch or flinging himself to the top of his six-foot cat tower, while uttering a low whine as if his body held so much energy, the containment of it was painful.

The first time I played the Brandenburg Concertos, however, Homer fell into a deep sleep right in the middle of chasing a paper ball around. It happened as swiftly as if he'd been shot in the neck with a tranquilizer dart.

My friend Felix was visiting that day. “Guess Homer doesn't like your taste in music,” he said.

I shrugged. “Everyone's a critic.”

HOMER WASN'T A creature who was moved simply by the sounds he heard around him. He was equally concerned with the sounds he himself produced. It was important to Homer to feel that he and I were in constant communication with each other, and he was never content—as my other two cats were—to incorporate silent gestures or postures into our vernacular. Scarlett, for example, would sit pointedly in front of the litter box when she thought it was time for me to clean it, and Vashti had a bizarre, ritualistic dance that she did in circles around her food bowl whenever she was hungry.

But Homer—who, of course, had no understanding that he was visible generally or visible to me specifically—eschewed such imprecise methods of getting his point across. At three years of age, he had developed a full, incessant range of meows and yelps that bordered on the human in its nuance and complexity.

Homer was still convinced that as long as he made no sound, I couldn't "see" him, and he never tired of trying to get away with things right under my nose that he knew he shouldn't. As a kitten, he had accepted my command of "No!" with nothing beyond a look of confusion. *How can she always know what I'm doing?!* These days, he argued with me—with a long, high-pitched *meeeeeeeh* I thought of as his way of saying, *Awwwww ... c'mon, Ma ...*

He had a very specific meow that meant, *Where's my worm? I can't find my worm!* and another, slightly more prolonged meow that meant, *Okay, I found my worm, now I need you to throw it.* Then there was a low, guttural, drawn-out kind of cry that I heard if I was thoroughly engrossed in something—watching a movie, say—and hadn't paid attention to him in a couple of hours. It was a meow that very clearly said, *I'm boooooooooored*, and it would only be discontinued if I hauled out something for him to play with.

There were happy, half-swallowed little yips that greeted me whenever I came through the front door. *Yay, you're home! A tiny, plaintive mew?* that went up at the end, like a sentence punctuated by a question mark, meant Homer had fallen asleep in a room I was

no longer in and, now that he was awake, wanted to know where I was.

A piercing, persistent kind of *mew* that I rarely heard strummed a fearful twang in my stomach, because it meant Homer had gotten himself stuck in or on top of something and didn't know how to get back down. "Where are you, Homer-Bear?" I'd say, following the sound of his cries through the apartment until I located him. The one that drove me to distraction was a repetitive, atonal *mrow, mrow, mrow*, which Homer produced if I'd been talking on the phone for a while. It was like a small child's relentless chanting of *Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy*, until, exasperated, I'd put one hand over the receiver and say, "Homer, can't you see I'm on the phone right now?"

Hey—most people forgot Homer was blind once they'd spent enough time with him. I occasionally forgot, too.

ONE OF THE luxuries I now indulged in was a subscription to the newspaper—the first I'd ever had in my own name. The leisurely perusal of the paper over a light breakfast was a treasured and essential component of my morning routine.

Delivery of the newspaper soon became a highlight in Homer's schedule as well. This was not because he'd developed a sudden, passionate interest in current affairs. It was because the good people at the newspaper production plant saw fit to churn out and deliver the paper to my door every morning—wrapped in a rubber band.

Homer had never been interested in rubber bands, even though most cats love them. Generally, what they like to do is eat them—a dangerous, and sometimes fatal, habit. If I happened to lose track of one and it made its way into Scarlett's or Vashti's paws, she'd bat it around and munch on it happily until I saw it and took it away. Homer would sit nearby, straining his ears for some clue as to what, exactly, made this game so interesting. *I don't get it, you guys. What's the big deal?*

But that was before Homer learned that a rubber band, stretched taut around a rolled-up newspaper and plucked by a single claw, would produce *a sound*.

As with so many great discoveries, this one was an accident. I had left the paper, with its rubber band, on the coffee table one morning while I retrieved my toast and juice. Homer leapt onto the table to investigate. From the kitchen, I heard *a ping!* There was a pause, then another *ping!* The next pause was shorter than the first, and it was followed by a *Ping! Pi-ping ping! Ping!* I came out from the kitchen to find Homer cocking his head curiously from side to side, as enthralled by the reverb of the still-vibrating rubber band as he'd been by its initial sound. He plucked the rubber band again and pressed his paw over it while it vibrated. Upon realizing that doing this made both sound and vibration stop, he plucked at it once more.

"I'm sorry, kitty," I said, and I really did feel bad. He was having such a good time! But I wasn't about to forgo my morning paper fix—and I certainly wasn't leaving Homer in possession of a rubber band. I unrolled the newspaper and threw the rubber band into the trash. And there, I thought, was the end of it.

Like most cats, Homer was a creature of habit. Being blind, he was even more wedded to his habits than the average cat. Homer, for example, would only curl up next to me on my left side. He may not have even known I had a right side, so ingrained was his habit of sitting to my left. If I adopted a position on the couch that made only my right side available, Homer would wander around, meowing in nervous confusion, until I shifted over.

When I added a set of squat wooden candlesticks to the coffee table, it took Homer weeks to learn not to bump into them. This wasn't because he was slow in figuring out how to avoid solid objects; he'd learned his way around the entire apartment in under an hour. It was because once he'd learned the exact number of steps left and right that took him from one end of the coffee table to the other—like learning where immovable things such as walls and doorways were—it was difficult for him to get past the ingrained

habit of his memorized routine. When I tried to replace Homer's stuffed worm—which was, by now, hardly more than a few tufts of fabric clinging to a tiny, dented bell—with an identical new one, he sniffed it once, gave it a single toss into the air, and stalked away in disgust. He slept in the same spot on my bed every night, for exactly as long as I slept. Scarlett and Vashti would also pile into bed with me, but they would leave in the late-night hours to scamper around the apartment together. Homer had trained himself to sleep as long as I slept, and to remain there until I awoke.

Waiting for the predawn *thunk!* of the newspaper against our front door immediately became a new Homer habit. The joys he'd discovered in making his own music were so great that they overrode his three-year-long old habit of sleeping as long as I did. No matter how I tried to wean him from the newspaper and its rubber band, no matter how I tried to distract, cajole, or plead with him, he would sit with his nose flush against the crack of the front door at exactly five thirty every morning. Once he heard the paper land, he'd paw at the door and meow frantically (*The paper's here! Mom, hurry, the paper's here!*) until I stumbled out of bed long enough to bring it in and drop it at his feet. My reward for this act of mercy was a solid hour of *Ping! Ping! Ping! Pi-ping pi-ping ping!*

It was maddening.

Finally, to preserve both my sleep and my sanity—because the constant strumming of that single note, over and over again, was killing the latter as surely as it was the former—I did something I remembered my grandmother doing for me when I was a child. I took an empty Kleenex box and wrapped five rubber bands of varying thickness around it. I then handed this impromptu guitar over to Homer.

He was utterly enraptured. Each rubber band played a completely distinct note. The hollowness of the empty Kleenex box added depth and resonance to these notes. The best part was that, since this toy was available all the time, I was able to put it away while I slept and Homer resumed sleeping the whole night through with me, knowing it would be there waiting for him when he woke up. If I

was reading or talking on the phone, Homer entertained himself with it for endless, rhapsodic hours. Our home became a veritable philharmonic, where ad hoc concertos of *Ping! Ping plong BOING!* could be heard.

The only thing that interfered with this affair of the heart was the occasional breaking of a rubber band. It would snap up into Homer's face so suddenly, and with so little warning, that Homer leapt back a good foot and a half, grimacing horribly, his fur standing straight up on end. *What the ...?!?* He would approach the box again cautiously, cocking his head from left to right, and smack it quickly and firmly with his paw. *Hit me and I'll hit you back.* Then he'd leap away once more, as if afraid what the consequences of his own daring might be.

Homer would sulk for hours after an incident like this, refusing to so much as go near the thing after he'd smacked it back into submission. I couldn't help but laugh. "Art is suffering," I'd tell him. But he loved his tissue-box guitar too much to stay angry with it for very long. The next morning would find him plucking away as if nothing had gone awry.

I wish I could conclude this chapter by saying that Homer eventually learned to play something recognizable, like "Oh! Susanna" or anything from side one of *Led Zeppelin IV*.

But if he had, you almost certainly would have heard of him before this.



13 • Lord of the Flies

He looked like some lion of the wilderness that stalks about
exulting in his strength and defying both wind and rain.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

ASIDE FROM THE SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS I'D HAD—FOR MYSELF AS well as for Homer—in eschewing garden and ground-floor apartments, there had also been that secondary, but persistent, reality that dominated so much of Miami living.

I'm talking about the insects.

To live in Miami is to learn, the hard way, that the human population is on the losing side of a never-ending war with the insect kingdom. It's a battle in which you know you'll never gain any ground; the most you can do is shore up your defenses and try to hold the line. I might as well have set out cookies and featherbeds for six-legged intruders if I'd decided to go the garden-apartment route.

It was spring when we moved into our new apartment, and now we were in the thick of summer, that buggiest of all South Florida seasons. It was particularly rainy that summer, with thunderous

tropical systems moving through practically on a daily basis. It was the kind of weather that drove outdoor critters in, looking for relief.

Living on the eleventh floor went a long way toward controlling my apartment's wildlife population, but there were always those hardy souls who were more than equal to the climb. Chief among these were the flies—huge suckers bigger than my thumbnails and excruciatingly annoying.

For Homer's sake, I made something of a religion of getting in and out of the glass door leading to my balcony as quickly as possible. But—no matter how quickly I slid the door shut behind me—flies always managed to get in. If an influx of flies ran the risk of compromising my enjoyment of our new apartment, however, they added immeasurably to Homer's. Once all the boxes had been unpacked and thrown away, Homer again found himself unable to launch a successful frontal attack against Scarlett or Vashti. With the influx of flies, finally, there was something Homer could track and hunt without having to encounter either Vashti's passivity or Scarlett's scorn.

The first time Homer caught a fly was a few months after we'd moved in. I was shelving some new books in the living room when I heard a loud, angry buzzing from somewhere in the vicinity of just over my head. Looking around, I saw all three cats lined up—as if in formation—trailing slowly behind a fly zigzagging madly about five feet in the air.

Homer's head was raised and it pulsed rapidly back and forth in perfect time with the fly's irregular movements, his ears pricked up as high as they would go. Scarlett and Vashti's pupils were hugely dilated, so that their eyes seemed to be all pupil. They didn't unfix their gazes for even a second. It looked like they were making up their minds to pounce—but while they were still thinking about it, Homer, without any warning, was airborne.

He sprang straight up, rising and rising until the top of his head was higher than mine. The lower half of his body curved beneath him in a graceful arc. He hung in midair for a moment, an Olympic

gymnast at the crest of a dismount, and I heard his jaws snap shut. He landed nimbly on his hind legs and rested on his haunches.

The buzzing had stopped. The fly was gone.

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed involuntarily. Even Scarlett and Vashti blinked, looking impressed despite themselves. *Did we just see what we thought we saw?*

The only one who didn’t seem surprised was Homer himself. His jaws worked furiously, like a child chewing taffy, and I realized that—having never successfully captured anything before—he hadn’t considered that catching a fly in his mouth would mean he’d ... well ... end up with a fly in his mouth.

I’d bought a swatter and some fly strips when I first moved in, but they were destined to remain unopened, gathering dust in a kitchen drawer. I didn’t have the heart to deprive Homer of the joys of what soon became his favorite pastime. And to be honest, any efforts I might have made in the direction of fly control would have been superfluous anyway.

Homer honed the catching of flies into an art form, experimenting with different styles and strategies as necessity, or boredom, dictated. Sometimes he would leap up, as he had that first time, but rather than catching the fly in the air, he would slap at it energetically with his front paws, like a swimmer doing a doggy-paddle, until the fly was forced to the ground. Then, while the fly was struggling to take off again, Homer would back up a few inches and pounce on it. Sometimes he would chase a fly toward the balcony until it hit the sliding door. As it banged helplessly against the glass, Homer would press one paw against the hapless bug and slide it down into the corner where the door met the floor and hold it there until it stopped moving.

If a fly landed on the wall behind the sofa, Homer would stand on top of the back of the sofa with his hind legs and, lightning-fast, whap out a front paw to pin the fly against the wall. Then he’d lift his paw just enough to wedge his head in and scoop the fly up in his mouth. One time, I saw Homer dart up the back of a chair in pursuit

of a fly. Balancing on three legs on the back of the chair, he used the fourth one to swat at it feverishly. But it flew to a spot just behind Homer's head. Homer—I swear—propelled himself off the chair into a spectacular backflip, a head-over-tail pinwheel of a cat, catching the fly in the air and twisting his body around so that he landed, perfectly, on all fours.

“Okay, now you're just showing off,” I told him. But I couldn't help laughing at how remarkably pleased he looked with himself.

It got to the point that I didn't have to hear any actual buzzing to know there was a fly in our midst. Out of the corner of my eye I'd catch a black blur of speed and sinew zipping by, and I'd know.

I used to entertain myself sometimes by imagining conversations among those flies who observed the particular indignity of their compatriot's being caught by a blind cat. In my head, the dialogue went something like this:

FIRST FLY: *Did you see Carl get caught by that eyeless cat? And Carl had, like, a hundred eyes!*

SECOND FLY: *Yeah, well, Carl was an idiot.*

It wasn't only the flies that Homer felled in his new capacity as our home's head gamekeeper. He proved himself equally adept at dispatching all manner of pests: ants (which were so easy for him to catch, it was almost an insult to his abilities), mosquitoes, the occasional moth.

And then there were the roaches. I live in New York now, and I've seen what passes for a “roach” here in the Northeast. But let me tell you—some of those southern bad boys were so big, you could saddle them up and ride them in the Kentucky Derby. Living on a higher floor meant we weren't plagued with a full-fledged infestation. Given, however, that the larger ones—the ones we call palmetto bugs in the South—were able to fly, more than a few managed to creep their way in. And the ones that did always lived (briefly) to regret it.

Even big roaches are fast, but none of them were as fast or difficult to pinpoint as the flies Homer routinely caught. So the only thing that made catching roaches a real challenge for Homer was that flies announced their presence with loud buzzing, while the roaches were soundless. Or so I thought. But Homer's hearing was infinitely more sensitive than mine, or even than Scarlett's and Vashti's; on numerous occasions, I'd catch Homer cocking his head to listen to something I couldn't discern. Then he'd leap toward a particular spot where a bookcase met a wall and, sure enough, an enormous cockroach would come scuttling out.

Homer tended to eat everything he caught, except for the roaches. Those he saved for me. During a particularly rainy two weeks, I woke up every morning to find a neat pile of two or three palmetto bug corpses stacked in front of my bed.

As soon as he heard me stir, Homer would jump from the bed to stand over the pile of dead roaches, meowing in an inviting, anxious sort of way. (It would have been irrational in Homer's worldview to assume I would find, unassisted, anything soundless.) *Look, Mommy! Look what I brought you! Do you like them? Do you?*

"Thank you, Homer," I always said, grateful he couldn't see my reflexive grimace of disgust. "You're a very thoughtful kitty. Mommy loves her new roaches." Homer would stretch up his front paws and clutch my shins in a gesture that meant he was eager for me to pet and praise him, which I did—lavishly.

Now that I had my own place, I was entertaining friends on a fairly regular basis. Homer would always greet them with his customary friendly interest, but nothing ever diverted his attention from a six-legged intruder on the loose. "That is so *crazy!*" people would say upon seeing Homer snatch a fly out of five feet of air. "I mean, he's *blind!*"

"Don't tell him that," I'd reply. "I don't think he knows."

"He's like Mr. Miyagi catching flies with chopsticks in *The Karate Kid*," my friend Tony observed once. "I wish I had a whole box of flies and roaches I could release in here for him to catch."

I shuddered at the hideous prospect. “I’m incredibly glad you don’t.”

Homer hadn’t yet bagged his biggest game, however. That was an honor still to come.



14 • Mucho Gato

Ill deeds do not prosper, and the weak confound the strong.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

IT WAS AN UNCOMFORTABLY HOT NIGHT IN MID-JULY WHEN I AWAKENED, startled, at four o'clock in the morning, to a sound I'd never heard before.

It sounded like a cat growling, but the only one of my cats I'd ever heard growl was Scarlett. I knew it wasn't her, though. And it couldn't possibly be Vashti—Vashti who was so polite and unassertive that her meows came out as tiny squeaks; Vashti didn't have it in her to growl at anyone.

That could only leave Homer.

The mere fact of Homer's growling—Homer, who was friendly as a puppy, who was always so happy-go-lucky that I'd never known him to be so much as grumpy—already had me frightened. I squinted and struggled to see him in the darkness.

Faint light streamed in through the blinds from the streetlights outside. But Homer, black and eyeless, was completely invisible. I could tell, though, that he was close by, somewhere on the bed. I sat up and reached over to flip on my bedside lamp.

The first thing I saw was Homer, standing in the middle of the bed, puffed up to about three times his normal size. His back was completely arched, and every hair on his body stood straight up, his tail bristled and stiff as a pipe cleaner. His legs were set wide apart, and although his head was tucked down low, his ears were at full attention. He moved his head and ears evenly from side to side with the precision of a sonar dish. His front claws were extended farther than I'd ever seen them, farther than I would have thought physically possible. His growl continued, low and unbroken—not completely aggressive yet, but a definite warning.

Beyond Homer, standing at the foot of my bed, was a man I'd never seen before in my life.

In the disoriented way you think when woken out of a sound sleep, my mind rapidly considered and discarded all innocent explanations for this man's presence. Visiting friend? No. New boyfriend? No. Drunken neighbor who'd stumbled into my apartment instead of his own?

No, no, and no.

I felt every muscle in my body stiffen and tense, my very eyelids snapping open so wide and so fast that the muscles twinged in pain.

All I could think was that the buried nightmare of every woman living alone—the doomsday scenario that had spawned a thousand horror movies—was playing out right here, right now, *in my bedroom*. I also realized that, having never really believed it could ever happen to me, I had done nothing in the way of arming myself against such an encounter. My eyes plunged wildly around the room, considering what value each object I saw might have as a weapon.

The intruder looked as startled as I felt and, for a crazy moment, this struck me as highly ridiculous. Surely, among the three of us, he must have been the most prepared for whatever was about to happen. I mean, who had broken into whose apartment?

But then I realized he wasn't looking at me. He hadn't taken his eyes off Homer.

Like me, he had obviously heard Homer growling but, also like me, been unable to distinguish any visual evidence of Homer's presence. Unlike me, however, it was taking him a second to figure out *why* this cat—who gave every indication he was preparing an attack—had been so completely invisible. There was something weird going on here, something off about this cat, something wrong with this *cat's face* ...

Under more benign circumstances, I would have been deeply offended by the look of horror that broke over the burglar's own face when he realized what it was.

Homer may have been alarmed at how rigid my body had become, or perhaps by the fact that I was awake, yet not speaking to him in my usual reassuring tones. His growl rose drastically in both volume and pitch.

Some cats growl and bristle as a way of avoiding a fight, slowly backing up while maintaining an intimidating posture in the hope their adversary will back down first. But Homer wasn't backing up. With a slow precision I instantly recognized from all those failed attempts at stalking Scarlett, Homer was creeping forward, *toward* the intruder.

It's going to sound foolish (keep in mind that, about five seconds earlier, I'd been deeply asleep), but for a split second I was worried for the burglar's safety. It was simply my first, unthinking instinct when faced with an aggressive pet squaring off against somebody in my home. If anybody had asked me half an hour earlier, I would have told them that Homer would *never* attack anybody in my presence, that—even if for some impossible-to-imagine reason, Homer took it into his head to depart from his general friendliness toward everybody he met—the sound of my command "*No!*" would have stopped him instantly. Homer was a troublemaker and a daredevil, but he never disobeyed me outright. I knew this for an absolute, positive fact. It was one of the cornerstones of the relationship I had with him, one of the fundamental things, aside from his blindness, that set Homer apart from other cats.

In that moment, though, I knew—*knew*—that if Homer indeed decided to attack this man, I wouldn't be able to stop him. The snarling, furious animal on my bed was a cat I'd never seen, didn't know, had absolutely no control over. The only question was how clawed up and bloodied the burglar, or I, or both of us, would get in the process of my subduing him.

It had been only a matter of seconds since I'd first switched on the lamp, and now my next move seemed so painfully obvious, I couldn't believe I wasn't already doing it.

I picked up the phone next to my bed to dial 911.

"Don't do that," the man said, speaking for the first time.

I hesitated for the briefest instant, and then I looked over at Homer. *Do what he's doing*, a voice in my head urged. *Act bigger than you really are*.

"Fuck off," I said to the man, and I made the call.

Then a lot of things happened at once. The 911 operator answered and I told her, "*There's somebody in my apartment!*"

"There's somebody in your apartment?" she repeated.

"Yes, there's somebody in my apartment!"

Homer, meantime, had finally galvanized into action. He might not have understood relative size, he might not have realized how very much smaller he was than this man standing menacingly over the bed, but if there was one thing Homer *did* understand it was pinpointing a location based on sound.

The intruder, in speaking, had let Homer know precisely where he was.

With a loud hiss that bared his fangs (prior to this, I'd always thought of them as "teeth"), Homer thrust the whole weight of his body forward and brought his right front leg into the air, stretching it up and out so far that it looked, bizarrely, as if the bone connecting his leg to his shoulder had come out of its socket, held in place only by muscle and tendons. His claws extended even farther

(good God—how long *were* those claws?). Glinting like scythes in the lamplight, they slashed viciously at the man's face.

Homer missed by the merest fraction of an inch—and only because the man had reflexively snapped his head back.

“Okay, ma'am, I'm dispatching officers now,” the 911 operator said. “Stay on the phone ...”

I never heard the rest of her instructions, however, because at that point the intruder turned and ran. Homer, his tail still bolt upright, leapt from the bed and raced after him.

“*HOMER!*” My shriek was unlike anything I'd ever heard coming out of my own mouth. It tore the inside of my throat till it felt bloody. “*HOMER, NO!*”

I threw down the phone and ran after them.

Like two competing runners panting toward a finish line, two separate and distinct fears vied for prominence in my head. The first was that Homer might actually catch up to the intruder. Who knew what that man would do if he saw Homer's talons coming at him a second time?

I was also terrified that Homer might chase the burglar out the front door and into the long, labyrinthine corridors of my apartment complex—and, unable to see his way back home, be lost to me forever. As this picture played vividly in my imagination, I was shocked to realize how deep-seated it was, how a fear of Homer's getting lost had always lain in the background of my thoughts, coiled and silent but ready to spring up and bite me at a moment's notice.

Homer had made it out the front door and about six feet into the hallway before I caught up with him. Looking around—to make sure neither of the other cats had gotten out as much as to confirm that the burglar was gone—I saw the emergency exit door at the far end of the corridor swinging closed.

I scooped Homer up in one hand. The staccato pounding of his heart alarmed me, although my own chest cavity felt molten, as if it

were full of liquid fire. Homer resisted mightily, flailing out his front claws at random and catching the skin inside my forearm with his back claws, raising a trail of angry red welts. It wasn't until I'd reentered the apartment, slamming the locks shut behind me and throwing Homer roughly to the ground, that he seemed to come back to himself.

"*When I say no I mean no, god dammit!*" I screamed. "You're a bad cat, Homer! *A bad, bad cat!*"

Homer was panting heavily, his rib cage expanding and shrinking in rapid succession. I saw him take a deep breath, and he cocked his head slightly to one side.

One of the things about Homer that always clutched at my heart was the way it seemed like he really tried to *understand* me when I talked to him. Like right now, as he tilted his face up toward the sound of my voice, struggling to make sense of my yelling. On the one hand, every instinct in his body told him he had just done the exact right thing: There had been a threat, and he had defended his territory and chased the threat off. What could be wrong about that?

But here was Mommy, yelling at him as he'd never been yelled at before, obviously of the opinion that what he'd just done was very, very wrong. So which of us was right?

Homer didn't creep toward me apologetically the way he usually did when I was angry. He just sat there on his haunches, his tail curled lightly around his front paws like ancient Egyptian statues I'd seen of the cats who guarded temples.

I found myself remembering a scene from the novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. A ragged group of peasants had just done battle with Fascist soldiers in a Spanish Civil War skirmish, and had suffered grievous losses. Among the dead was the loyal horse of an elderly farmer who'd joined in the fight. Kneeling over the body of the fallen horse, the farmer whispered in his ear, "*Eras mucho caballo,*" which Hemingway had translated as: *Thou wert plenty of horse*.

It was a line that always stuck with me, because it was a single sentence that had seemed, to me, to contain multitudes. What the

farmer was saying was that this horse had been a horse beyond all other horses, a horse who had fought like a man and died like a hero. For sheer valor, he was worth an entire herd of horses, so much horse that the body of a single horse had been barely sufficient to contain him.

Homer looked even smaller than usual as he sat there, his head still bent to one side as his fur sank quietly back into its normal patterns.

Such a little boy, I thought. *He's such a tiny boy!*

"Oh, Homer," I said, and my voice was ragged. I knelt down and rubbed him behind the ears. He purred softly in response. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'm so sorry, little guy."

There was a sharp rap at the door, followed by an extremely welcome: "Police!"

"I'm okay!" I called back. "I'm coming."

I picked Homer up again. Homer loved to cuddle, but he hated to be picked up and would squirm and wriggle in a desperate attempt to regain the ground. Now, though, he rested quietly in my arms. I buried my face in the fur of his neck.

"Eres mucho gato, Homer," I whispered. *Thou art plenty of cat.*

I placed him gently back on his own legs.



15 • My Homer/ My Self

A second ago you were all in rags, and now you are like some
god come down from heaven.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

LIGHT TRAVELS AT 186,000 MILES PER SECOND, BUT SLOWS TO ABOUT two-thirds of that speed when it hits the lens of your eye. If this didn't happen we would be functionally blind, unable to distinguish more than shadows interspersed with vague patches of brightness. It's this slowing down that allows our brains to interpret and relay back to us what light reveals. But our minds go even further, imposing logic and regularity, smoothing over distortions and filling in the occasional gaps that open in our visual field. It's the reason why, for example, an object traveling almost too fast for our eyes to follow is seen as a blur. The object isn't really a blur; the blur is simply our minds' way of creating order where otherwise there would be confusion.

The lesson here, I suppose, is that what we think we see isn't precisely the way things are in the objective reality that exists outside our own heads. Or, to put it more simply, things aren't always what they appear.

I wandered around in a kind of shock for days after the break-in. (*I could have died*, I told myself repeatedly. *I could have been raped and murdered and died!*) Nothing looked or felt or sounded the way it should. Music was too jarring; sunlight grated on me like sandpaper with its too-brightness. But silence and darkness squeezed the breath out of me with the terrors they held. Familiar things offended me by pretending to be ordinary when nothing, clearly, could be taken for what it seemed. My home was not the safe haven a home was supposed to be, and unknown horrors skulked beneath the surface of everything.

Homer returned to his customary cheerfulness far more quickly than I did. By the next morning—as red-eyed a sunrise as I’d ever stayed up to witness—his attitude about the incident seemed to be, *Boy, that was weird, huh? Let’s play fetch!* It was as if the fierce defender he’d morphed into so breathtakingly and unexpectedly had been merely a trick of the eye. I found myself calling just about everyone I knew and telling them about what Homer did, not so much to brag about him (although bragging certainly seemed warranted) but because I felt the need to cement a memory that was hard to maintain in light of Homer’s unruffled complacency a mere five hours later.

Most of us with pets come to feel eventually that we know everything about them—that we can predict with near certainty what they’ll do or how they’ll react in any given situation. My father had famously walked some of our dogs without a leash on occasion because, “Tippi will *always* stop when I say *no*,” or, “Penny would *never* run away from my side.”

But my father, who understood pets better than anybody, was also always the first to say that a pet was an animal first and foremost, and that with animals—as with people—there was always room for the unpredictable.

I had thought that I knew Homer as well as my father knew our dogs. If Homer nosed around an empty tuna can—sniffing it, turning it upside down, digging inside it with his front paws in a frustrated

manner—I would say to an observer, “He doesn’t understand how something can smell so strongly of tuna and not *be* tuna.”

I’ve already noted that Homer slept with me every night, falling asleep precisely when I did and sleeping for exactly as long as I slept. But it was more than that. When I ate, Homer trotted off to his food bowl. When I was in an especially good mood, Homer ran zaniely around the apartment, his cartwheels and caperings the physical manifestation of what I was feeling. If I was sad, Homer curled in a tight little ball in my lap and couldn’t be persuaded out of his funk even when presented with a favorite toy or a fresh can of tuna. When I walked from room to room, Homer might charge in front of me or lope behind me or weave in and out of my legs. But the rhythms of our steps had so completely adjusted themselves to the other’s that neither of us ever missed a beat, never faltered, never tripped the other one up. I could walk down an unlit hallway with Homer darting around my feet and, without being able to see him, never come close to stumbling or falling over him.

But Homer was also clearly capable of things—courageous, extraordinary, heroic things—that none of us could have predicted when I’d first adopted him as a helpless blind kitten, or that even I could have predicted now, having spent three years with him. I was proud of him. How could I not be? I had always been the one to insist that Homer was just as “normal” as any other cat. But this was something else altogether. Regarding him as *heroic* rather than *blind* or even *ordinary* required a slight adjustment in my thinking.

A long-married friend, on the eve of my own wedding years later, would tell me, “Never forget—you’re still going to bed with a stranger every night.” By then, though, this was something I had known for a while. It was the second important lesson about adult relationships that Homer taught me.

They never did catch the man who broke into our apartment. A police report was filed and I went down to the Miami Beach Police Department to look through their big book of mug shots. I saw a couple of pictures that might have resembled my burglar, but I was afraid to identify anybody. Whenever I remembered that night, the

only thing I saw in my mind's eye was Homer; there was no way I would have sworn in court that anybody I picked out of a lineup or a mug-shot book was the right man.

Still, it was weeks before I could sleep. But where my fear and outrage stayed with me, those feelings on Homer's part had clearly been the work of a night. Homer slept like a baby next to me on those long, sleepless nights, while my eyes popped open at every wisp of sound.

I had always envisioned myself as being the one who would make the world intelligible for Homer. I would be the eyes he didn't have, the one who would soothe his fears in the dark. But Homer was far more comfortable in darkness, in the world of random sound, than I was. I'll admit that, in the aftermath of the break-in, it was I who felt safer knowing Homer was sleeping next to me.

It occurred to me as I lay there, battling my newfound insomnia, that what I had always taken to be Homer's fearlessness despite his blindness was perhaps the opposite. Homer had known there were things to fear in the dark; he wouldn't have reacted so aggressively if he hadn't known there was cause to be afraid. But what could you do with that fear? You had to live your life, didn't you? Where another cat might have spent his life hiding and hissing, forever anticipating dangers that might or might not be there, Homer simply went about his business, confident on some instinctive level that he could deal with threats if and when they arose.

I didn't tell my parents about the break-in. There was nothing they could do after the fact, I reasoned, other than worry—and if I was having trouble sleeping, who knew how long it would be before my mother was able to close her eyes again? But Homer was made much of in the following days by our friends. “No way!” they said. “*No. Freaking. Way!*” They, too, looked at Homer as if they'd never seen him before. He was our Daredevil, our real-life superhero, although he probably never connected his bravery of that night with the endless cans of tuna, pounds of sliced turkey, and tubs of inexpensive caviar (which he chewed so thoughtfully—intrigued by its fishy smell but unfamiliar with its texture) that he received.

Scarlett and Vashti, who were given their share of this bounty, also seemed to accept it unquestioningly, content to enjoy the goods the gods had seen fit to provide.

I think the thing that drove me craziest was wondering *why*? Why me, why *my* apartment? The most maddening thing to accept is that there usually isn't a *why*. Or there probably is—because effects have causes—but you'll never know what it was. Not knowing makes it impossible to avoid having the exact same thing happen again. But it's also liberating. The world could be dangerous and bad things sometimes happened, but there was nothing you could do except live your life. And it would be foolish if, in the process of living it, you didn't also enjoy it.

Homer, in his own way, had known this all along.

In the end, after the shock and the fear and the anger had subsided—when Homer was once again an ordinary cat who loved rubber bands and organized daring raids on bookcases and pantry shelves—I was left with two things. I realized I had succeeded in “raising” Homer as I had long ago resolved to. Homer was, indeed, brave and independent, uncrippled by self-doubt. I had been emphatic in insisting that Homer could take care of himself—just like any other cat. And so he could. He had proven that, under the right circumstances, he could take care of me as well.

And I was also left with a gratitude so profound and solid that it was like a third living presence in whatever room Homer and I were in together. In the dark hours of four or five AM, when even a town like South Beach had quieted down for the night, thoughts of how that other night could have ended rose like a wave to drag me under. My eyes would well with tears, and I would pull Homer closer to me, murmuring, “Thank God for you. Thank God for you, little cat!”

Homer may have surprised me, but there was no denying this new, deeper symmetry between us. Once upon a time, I had saved Homer's life. And now, years later, he had saved mine.



16 • Cats and the Single Girl

The sons of all the chief men among you are pestering my
mother to marry you against her will.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

PRIOR TO THE BREAK-IN, I HAD BEEN ON EXACTLY ONE DATE WHERE THE man in question made it past the front door of my apartment and into the apartment itself. He'd arrived on a Thursday evening to pick me up, and I'd invited him inside for a drink before we set out. I went into the kitchen to mix us some cocktails. When I came back into the living room, I found Homer trapped in a corner by my date, who was standing in front of Homer and hissing loudly at him. There was a wild, terrified look on Homer's face as his ears turned rapidly back and forth, as if he was trying to hear his way into an escape route.

I nearly dropped the glasses I was carrying. "What the ...?"

"He came over to me," my date explained. "Black cats are bad luck."

Most people made a point of being kind to Homer. A small few were indifferent and simply left him alone. But I had never witnessed anybody going out of his way to *frighten a blind cat*. The voice I heard in my head sounded a lot like my mother's. *What kind of a person does such a thing? Who raised this man?*

It may have been the one time in my life when I wished I were a man, because what I wanted more than anything in that moment

was to haul off and belt that guy in the face. I had a delightful vision of smashing the glass I held, *Sopranos*-style, against the side of his skull. My hands clenched into fists around the ice-filled glasses until I thought frostbite would set in, but my voice was measured.

“The cat lives here,” I said. “You do not. Please *get the hell out* of my apartment.”

He was the first and last man, other than my male friends, who would be invited into my home for many a month. *See what can happen?* I would think. Even people you met through work or through friends could be scary in all kinds of ways you couldn’t possibly know about beforehand.

One of the things I had looked forward to when I moved out of my parents’ house was dating. It wasn’t that I hadn’t gone out on dates when I’d been living with them; but, once you’re out of high school, the idea of sitting on your parents’ couch with a guy you like loses its appeal. Finding a serious boyfriend—one who I spent more days with than without—would have meant spending most of my time at his place, which would have required far more time away from my cats than I would have found acceptable. The whole situation had hampered me in ways that I expected to free up once I was living on my own.

Things didn’t work out exactly as I’d envisioned as the months in my apartment passed. Sometimes it almost felt as if I’d had more of a social life when I lived with my parents. Now that I no longer had my parents’ presence to fall back on as a pretext for not bringing somebody back to my place, I seemed to be avoiding the my-place-or-yours discussion altogether by limiting my social activities to evenings out with groups of friends. Occasionally, these outings included a guy who I might or might not like, who might or might not like me back, but that was about it.

My job—the job that enabled me to live in my own apartment—was very demanding. I worked long hours and told myself that my career was more important right now than “boys.”

But that wasn't the whole truth. I was a part of the *Sex and the City* generation. The entirety of popular culture—television, movies, magazines—was united in assuring me that a challenging career combined with a decadent love life was my birthright—practically an obligation for a girl my age.

I liked men, and I liked getting to know better the men I found interesting. But I also enjoyed living on my own for the first time in my life. I wasn't anxious to fall into a relationship and end up with somebody in my home four or five nights a week, or—an even worse scenario—discussing the possibility of moving in together.

And I was fiercely protective of my cats, particularly Homer. I didn't want to bear the scrutiny of somebody who might not like cats very much, or who might judge me as less desirable for having three of them. I wasn't willing to form the slightest emotional attachment to anybody with whom I might have an *it's me or the cats* conversation somewhere down the road. After my experience with Hissy the Wonderputz, I was reluctant to go out on a second date with anybody who so much as frowned when the word *cat* was mentioned.

Most of my friends went out with men, brought them home impulsively, and figured out as things went along how mature, compatible, and commitment-oriented the man in question was. The whole point of relationships in your twenties was supposed to be about making mistakes, learning from them, and establishing the criteria that would eventually lead you to The One.

But I had to be satisfied as to a certain basic level of responsibility and cat-friendliness before I even thought about bringing a man into my home. A visitor might decide to go out onto my balcony and forget to close the balcony door behind him. It was an easy enough mistake to make—but the rapidity with which such a mistake could blossom into full-blown tragedy, ending with Homer plummeting eleven stories, was unbearable to contemplate. Turning a back, even for a second, on an open front door while accepting a Chinese food delivery would allow Homer all the time he'd need to dart outside to “explore.” Another girl might wail in irritation over boyfriends

who always left the toilet seat up or consistently cracked the bedroom window open too wide. My friends and I laughed about such minor lapses—the silly thoughtlessness that crops up in even the best relationships—but in my world, there was nothing funny or minor about the consequences a moment's thoughtlessness could bring.

“You’re a control freak,” my friend Tony frequently informed me. “You want to try to control everything, and you’re using Homer as an excuse.”

He wasn’t entirely right. Homer did require more consideration than another cat would. The carefree irresponsibility I’d longed for when living with my parents, of being able to say *I have no one to please but myself*, was a moment in my life that had come and gone, if it had ever existed at all. I didn’t regret it; the rewards of living with Homer far outweighed the limitations. Nevertheless, the limitations remained.

But Tony wasn’t entirely wrong, either. I could make a good argument for doing a better job than most of my friends did of vetting dates before I brought them home. But there was no argument I could make for refusing involvement altogether.

During those weeks of insomnia after my apartment was broken into, I thought about my life and where it was going. I spent hours weighing and reviewing every major decision I’d made since leaving college, and innumerable trivial choices—a dress I’d loved but hadn’t bought; my decision not to visit the Louvre during my one day in Paris a decade ago, because I’d wanted to experience the city outside of museums—came under scrutiny. In the aftermath of what had felt like a near-death experience, it seemed important to be able to assure myself, *If I had died that night, I wouldn’t have had any regrets about how I lived*.

Overall, I was pleased with the progress I’d made over the past couple of years. I was self-sufficient for the first time, and I was proud of myself for getting there. I had created what I felt was a reasonably happy life for myself and my feline brood.

It was the little things, I realized, that had a way of getting away from you and never coming back—the afternoons in a city you might never visit again, or the nights when a group of friends, having been out later than anyone had intended, decided to stay up to watch the sun rise over the ocean, but you went home because it was late, after all, and there was work the next day. Adopting Homer had made me feel older than my age in many ways. But I wasn't old, not really. And I wouldn't be young forever.

There were whole areas of my life that I was cutting myself off from. I didn't necessarily subscribe to the notion that said, *What is it all worth if you have no one to share it with?* If you had work you enjoyed, a home you loved, and friends you could laugh with, you were already luckier than probably 90 percent of the world's population.

I knew this to be true. But I also, in a very basic and primal way, wanted to love someone. I wanted someone to love me.

I wasn't a risk taker by nature. Blind leaps into the unknown were Homer's province, not mine. But risk was an inescapable fact of life. Sleeping alone in your own bed in your own home behind a locked door could be risky, as I'd learned. There was something to be said for being young and romantic, for bubbling up with breathless excitement when the phone rang and bemoaning your ill fortune—over a pint of ice cream and a stack of romantic comedies—when it didn't.

And so what if I wasn't looking for somebody to spend the rest of my life with right now? Not everything had to be so goal-oriented. Look at Homer. He had no idea where he was climbing or running or jumping to half the time. Simply to be in motion was a joy undertaken for its own sake.

I BEGAN TO approach dating with the resolute intention of finding a few brave souls who would pass what I came to think of as “the Homer test.” I didn't have anything so formal as a written questionnaire (I was a touch neurotic when it came to Homer's safety, but I wasn't

crazy), but I listened closely to anecdotes and asked probing questions. Was the man in question absent-minded? Was he forever fumbling around for keys or his wallet, or did he have a sharp memory for small details? Had he ever had a beloved pet, one who perhaps had required close attention and long-term care? Was he the kind of guy whose siblings entrusted him to take nieces and nephews to ball games or on camping trips, confident they would return in one piece? I figured someone who could remember that Johnny couldn't so much as inhale a whiff of any food containing nuts, or that Sally couldn't spend more than fifteen minutes in the sun without exploding into hives, was up to the task of remembering the very few rules I'd established in my own home to keep Homer safe without having to think about it constantly.

Homer was as fascinated with these men as he was with every new person he met, and they were no less fascinated by him. Usually, they started out being skeptical about taking on a woman with three cats. It wasn't that they disliked cats per se, but three seemed excessive, and one had to wonder about the owner of such a horde.

After a few visits to my home, however, most of them became devoted members of the cult of Homer.

Homer was certainly a very "boyish" little cat, and I think the men who met him were taken with how scrappy and rough-and-tumble he was. Homer still loved to wrestle around and play spirited games of tag or fetch as much as he had back when he'd stayed with Jorge and his friends. It's said that most men prefer dogs to cats, and maybe that's true, but Homer was about as puppyish as a cat could be when it came to instant affection and playful high spirits.

Living with Homer, it was easy to forget the things about him that were so astonishing to others. The mere idea of meeting a cat without eyes struck most people as a once-in-a-lifetime novelty. I think they expected Homer to look gruesome or malformed, because most of them made a point of noting, with surprise evident in their voices, how normal Homer looked. "Like he just has his eyes closed," they said. That Homer moved with such graceful self-

assurance, that he was able to feed himself, groom himself, and navigate around the walls and furniture in my home, struck newcomers as nothing short of miraculous.

Homer was uniformly friendly with nearly everybody, but the small band of men who were granted access to him were sure that they—and only they—had a gift, some extraordinary inner quality that drew this blind creature to them. People loved Homer as much for how he made them feel about themselves as for his love of mischief and play. To forge a bond of trust and friendship with this sightless little cat could only mean that one possessed a streak of goodness, a purity of spirit that might never have been detected before this, but that was obviously real. (Homer saw it, didn't he?) In fact, I never had a single boyfriend who wasn't convinced he had a unique and special relationship with Homer.

"Homer's my buddy!" they all claimed.

"Homer's everybody's buddy," I would reply fondly—not meaning to undercut them, but speaking from the pride I always felt at how engaged and outgoing my little guy had turned out to be.

"Yeah, but it's different with Homer and *me*," they would say, with the kind of confidence that admitted no room for dispute or doubt. I never corrected them a second time; who was I to argue with anybody who loved Homer?

Homer may have had similarly unique relationships with each of these men, but the particular forms the relationships took were always different. One such boyfriend, a pillar of Miami's international finance community who'd played guitar with a garage band back in high school, discovered Homer's love of the rubber-band-wrapped tissue box and pulled his real guitar out of storage to "jam" with Homer. He even let Homer strum on the real guitar a few times, declaring him a prodigy. A chef at one of the local restaurants enjoyed preparing different recipes and watching Homer's varying reactions depending upon what was cooking. Beef was mildly interesting to Homer, fish was *very* interesting, and anything with turkey made him absolutely frantic. Homer developed

a wild attachment to a specific kind of fresh-roasted-deli-sliced turkey, and was able to distinguish it—while it was still wrapped in plastic and waxed paper—from lesser turkeys and deli meats. “He has the nose of a gourmet,” this man proclaimed, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him that Homer was equally passionate about the occasional can of Friskies that came his way. The boyfriend with fond memories of building pillow forts as a child delighted in bringing over boxes, large shopping bags, and anything else he and Homer could use to construct cat-sized caves, engaging in elaborate games of hide-and-seek that lasted for hours.

I wish I could say that I thought these men were overacting their interest in Homer as a way of getting closer to me. Deep down, I suspected that, if anything, the opposite was the case. Many a crestfallen boyfriend over the years, upon being broken up with, would tremulously ask, “Does ... does this mean I can’t see *Homer* anymore?”

I REMEMBER ONE man I dated, a man who met Homer a few times and whom I became well and truly infatuated with. He was brilliant, handsome, wildly funny, and one of the greatest kissers I’d ever encountered. We went out on a few progressively intense dates, and had just reached the shy-confessions stage of our burgeoning relationship (*You’re the most incredible woman I’ve met in years ...* that sort of thing) when he abruptly canceled three dates in a row at the last minute.

Anybody who’s been there knows the thoughts that start crowding your head in a situation like this. You’re simultaneously angry at the lack of consideration, and hurt by the inevitable conclusion that you must have done something wrong—surely, you must have become less interesting, or been too obvious about your feelings, for things to change so rapidly.

When I finally questioned this man about what was going on, he told me that his father had been an alcoholic, that the trauma of his childhood remained with him, and that while he liked me more than

he could say, he needed me to understand that he was the kind of guy who had to take things slow—but there was no doubt in his mind that we could get through this and end up stronger as a couple, that having “shared” we could only know each other better than we had before this conversation.

I told him never to call me again.

I didn’t make that statement thinking, *If he treats you this way now, early in the relationship, it’s not going to get any better*. I didn’t tell myself, *He couldn’t possibly like you as much as he says he does if he stands you up three times in a row*. That was all probably true, but it wasn’t what I was thinking.

What I felt was disgust. Following the logic of his argument, he was saying that it was okay to hurt me now (surely, he must have known that standing me up three times would hurt my feelings) because, some twenty-odd years ago, somebody else had hurt him. It was bad behavior masquerading as self-knowledge. He saw himself as a man who’d made a brave confession, who’d been honest—and honesty was an indisputable virtue. I saw someone who thought it was okay to transfer his own pain onto others because it was easier than handling it himself.

It wasn’t that I thought it was wrong. It was worse than wrong. It was unmanly.

Like any woman who’s spent enough years dating, I could fill a whole book with stories like these. But I come here neither to praise nor to bury the men I dated yet didn’t end up with. They had their admirable qualities, and if they made mistakes, well, so did I. We were only human, after all.

Since adopting Homer, however, my standards had changed. You could argue that comparing men with a cat would be ridiculous, and I wouldn’t disagree. But Homer had, without thinking, thrown himself between me and a threat to my life. I didn’t expect many such scenarios where a boyfriend would be called upon to do the same thing. But I admired Homer—I wished, almost every day, that I could be more like him. I wanted his strength, his courage, his

reflexive loyalty. I wanted to be as cheerful as he was in the face of adversity. And I wanted a man with those same qualities. I realized that I couldn't be with anybody long-term if I couldn't admire and look up to him. Intelligence, attractiveness, a sense of humor—these were all important things.

By themselves, though, they weren't enough.

Back when I first adopted Homer, that first time I saw him in my vet's office, I was struck by something about him that had seemed stronger and braver than other cats, or even most people. Before that, my criteria—the criteria I never thought about specifically, but responded to unconsciously—for evaluating both pets and people had been roughly the same: cuteness, intelligence, personality, how entertaining I found them to be, and so on. I was also—as should surprise nobody who knows I began my career in the charity sector—a sucker for feeling that I was needed. Scarlett and Vashti had been adopted because they so clearly needed me, and loved after that simply because they were mine.

It had been different with Homer. I had fallen in love with Homer because he was cheerful and brave, and not at all needy, despite the pain and loss of his earliest weeks of life. You can say that Homer was a cat and didn't know any better, that it wasn't as if he had said to himself, *Well, now, there's no point in being miserable over this disability that I can't change anyway.* And you'd be right. But I had worked with enough abused, injured, and traumatized animals to know that a great many of them never got over it and spent their lives cringing or snapping whenever anybody tried to get close. It was heart wrenching and certainly not something you blamed the animal for. They didn't know any better. But Homer didn't know any better, either. Homer's courage and optimism were innate—things that could be reinforced, but never taught. Bravery was Homer's reflex, just like catching flies or crouching down before he pounced on something.

Adopting Homer was the first time in my life when I made a decision about a relationship based on what I would have called essential character, if I had thought about it clearly at the time. It

wasn't Homer's charm or his need that had drawn me to him. It was the something about him that I would have respected in anyone—even in any human—if and when I found it.

As it turned out, the one romantic relationship that had the most profound impact on my life was also one of the shortest. He lived in New York, and long-distance relationships almost never work. This one was no different. But I did spend a few long weekends with him in Manhattan.

My best friend, Andrea, had recently moved to New York from California with the boyfriend she would undoubtedly soon be engaged to. Andrea's entire family lived in New York so it seemed likely that, even though Andrea's job had relocated her to five different cities in the last eight years, this move would be permanent. Whenever I went to visit my boyfriend in New York, I spent time with her as well.

I may not have fallen in love with the man, but I did fall in love with his city. To be a person who loves books is to be half in love with the idea of New York. After only a few days spent in the concrete reality of it, I was hooked.

"You should move here," Andrea would say when I saw her. "Think how much fun it would be if the two of us were in the same city together again."

It was an appealing idea, but it was also a scary one. I had my family and friends to fall back on in any worst-case scenarios as long as I stayed in Miami—and, as I had learned, worst-case scenarios had a way of cropping up. In Manhattan, I would be truly on my own for the first time in my life.

"What do you guys think?" I asked Scarlett, Vashti, and Homer. "How would you feel about being New York City cats?"

Scarlett and Vashti were watching Homer with lazy interest as he tried to find a trajectory that would allow him to leap directly from the top of his six-foot cat tower to the top shelf of the closet. He'd landed flat on his face three times already, but that hadn't deterred him from attempt number four.

Fortune favors the brave, I thought.



17 • “The Pussy Galore Tour”

**Zeus takes all travelers under his protection, for he is the
avenger of all suppliants and foreigners in distress.**

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

BY JANUARY OF 2001, MY THIRTIETH BIRTHDAY LOOMED ON THE HORIZON (technically it wasn't until October, but milestone birthdays cast long shadows), and dark days had descended upon the dotcom industry. Internet companies everywhere were shedding employees or shutting down altogether, and Miami was no exception. The company I had originally gone to work for had closed its doors months earlier. I had quickly found a position with another firm, but a mere three months later, they shut down as well. I'd found yet another job within six weeks, but they soon lost their funding and cut my salary in half. I was hemorrhaging savings as I struggled to make ends meet.

It was a state of affairs that couldn't continue indefinitely. I began to send résumés everywhere I could think of, but hiring in Miami had all but frozen solid. The fallout of the dot-com failures had spread its misery across most of Miami's other industries—tourism, real estate, finance—and nobody was hiring staff for marketing positions. I didn't get a single call for an interview.

The beauty of having nothing to lose is that you have everything to gain. My vague soap bubble of an idea about moving to New York had drifted aimlessly in the background of my thoughts for some time, but it had always seemed too impractical for serious consideration. For one thing, why would anybody in New York hire me from Miami? Moving would be expensive, not to mention how much more expensive it was to live in New York City than South Florida. And wasn't I getting a little old for such a major life change? Starting over in Manhattan seemed like the sort of thing one did straight out of college, not when one was approaching thirty.

But as the Miami job market continued to dry up, I started e-mailing my résumé to companies in New York. *Why not?* I asked myself, and couldn't think of a single good reason.

It was a shot in the dark, one that I didn't really expect to hit its target. Within three weeks, however, I had requests for interviews with five firms in New York City. I flew up the following week to meet with them, and by the end of that week I had three written offers of employment. One was for a director of marketing position with a large technical recruiting firm located in Manhattan's Financial District, six blocks from the World Trade Center. In addition to the generous salary they offered, they were also willing to offset my moving expenses. I had a friend who lived in an apartment building only a block away from this company, and he pulled some strings with his leasing office. Twenty-four hours later, I'd landed an apartment without any of the drama one normally hears associated with apartment hunting in New York.

It was almost disconcerting how easily everything had fallen into place. By mid-February, my whim of only a few weeks ago was a reality.

I was moving to New York.

ALL THE ARTICLES I'd read over the years on the subject of caring for a blind cat were united on one point: The most important thing was to

create a stable and permanent environment for the cat. You were advised not to do things like move furniture around or change the litter box's location. Moving homes altogether is unsettling enough for any cat—cats not being creatures who regard change favorably—and is especially to be avoided when the cat in question is blind.

Homer was about to undergo his fifth move in five years. Like the hero Odysseus, imagined by the poet for whom Homer had been named, perpetual journeying seemed to be his destiny.

I considered various options for getting my three cats to New York with a minimum of trauma for all concerned. I could drive the four of us up, but was reluctant to subject the cats to two full days in their carriers—which they hated—not to mention the logistics of litter breaks, finding motels along the way that would be willing to accommodate three cats, and so on.

Flying up would make the most sense—at least it would get the whole thing over and done with faster than any other option—but I flat-out refused to check my cats as baggage. The thought of them in a cargo hold, cold and terrified, was something I couldn't even stand to think about. Nor was I eager to become one of those news stories you sometimes heard about, where a checked cat ends up as lost luggage, flying around the world for days and surviving by licking the condensation that forms in his carrier.

So I called the airline to find out if it was possible to bring the cats onto the plane with me. The requirements were both straightforward and daunting. A cat boarding a plane had to be contained in a regulation-sized carrier that would fit beneath the seat. The cat had to have a recent health certificate, which had to be presented to security personnel at the metal detectors and again at the gate. Each cat had to travel with a ticketed passenger, and only one cat was allowed per passenger. Only two cats were permitted in a cabin, and only four cats were permitted on the entire plane.

The carriers I already had and the health certificates wouldn't be a problem, as all three cats were in perfect health and up-to-date on their shots. But if I wanted to bring the three of them onto the plane

with me, I would have to find two other people willing to fly up to New York with me.

Hard as I searched, I was unable to locate a direct flight from Miami to New York that had room for three cats. There was a flight that connected through Atlanta, and if I cashed in all my frequent-flier miles I could just manage to upgrade one of the tickets to first class, in keeping with the two-cats-per-cabin restriction.

Then I called my friends Tony and Felix, two of the highest-energy people I knew and always up for an adventure. “How’d you guys like a free trip to New York?”

THE DAY WE moved was undoubtedly the most unsettling day of Homer’s life thus far. Our morning began just after daybreak, when the moving company I’d hired arrived to cart away everything we owned. I locked the cats in the bathroom during this process, where Scarlett and Vashti curled up warily in the bathtub atop some old towels I’d laid out for them. Homer meowed and pawed frantically at the bathroom door, hating his confinement and desperate to know the source of all the noise in the other rooms. When I finally released him he prowled compulsively through the empty apartment, unable to settle down and complaining at the top of his lungs for over an hour. *Hey! Where’s all our stuff?!* Homer had never been in a room completely devoid of furniture, and it was plain that he didn’t like it. Nothing that caused every familiar smell and texture to disappear could possibly bode well.

He wasn’t wrong.

The only things left in the apartment aside from a single suitcase were the three carriers for the cats. Scarlett and Vashti took one look at the carriers and fled, huddling defiantly in the farthest corner of a now empty walk-in closet. Fleeing at the sight of their carriers was something of a ritual, but I rounded them up within a few minutes and, cooing soothingly, loaded them in.

I always put Homer into his carrier last, because he was typically the easiest one to corral. Since he couldn't see the carriers, he didn't run as soon as they came out. And he was the one out of the three of them who was most likely to respond to commands like *No!* and *Stay!*

Maybe he was still unnerved by the mysterious disappearance of all our belongings, but Homer rebelled that morning in a way he never had before. *No, Homer!* I yelled. *Stay!* Even though there was nothing for him to hide under or behind, I still had to chase him for nearly twenty minutes. After I caught him he fought the carrier for all he was worth, clawing the fronts of my hands in the process. It wasn't that he was trying to claw *me* as he struck blindly at anything within reach. In fact, it was my involuntary cry of pain that ultimately subdued him just long enough for me to gently press the top of his head into the carrier and zip it up around him. Homer immediately began to wail.

By the time the cats were finally settled, and I'd cleaned and bandaged my hands, we were running half an hour behind schedule.

"Hurry, *hurry*," I said urgently to Tony and Felix in turn as I picked each of them up. We were driving to my parents' house, where we would leave my car and transfer to theirs so they could drive us to the airport. Scarlett and Vashti were mewling in their carriers in the backseat, but their cries were drowned out by Homer, who yowled at full volume from his spot up front next to me. He struggled, poked, and punched from within his carrier, so that it resembled a container of Jiffy Pop left on the stove.

"I'll take Vashti," Felix said, settling her carrier onto his lap. "I like her. She's the most glamorous."

"I don't have to take *that* one, do I?" Tony asked anxiously, eyeing Homer's roiling carrier.

"I'm taking Homer," I replied tersely. "Tony, you can take Scarlett."

I raced desperately over the causeway, trying to make up the time I'd lost fighting with Homer. I couldn't miss this flight. I just

couldn't. Trying to rebook for the six of us would be an unthinkable nightmare, and I was supposed to start my new job the following day. I was doing at least eighty, so it shouldn't have been a surprise when police lights appeared in my rearview mirror.

"Dammit," I swore in a loud whisper—although it was unnecessary to lower my voice. With all the noise Homer was making, nobody could have heard me anyway.

I pulled over, turned off the ignition, and rolled down my window. Homer was kicking up such a terrific racket, I could barely hear the police officer when he finally reached the car. "I'm sorry," I said in a slightly raised voice as I gestured toward my ear. "I can't hear you. Could you speak up?"

The cop raised his voice, too. "I said, *do you know how fast you were going?*"

"Oh!" I looked around helplessly as I handed over my driver's license, as if the right answer would somehow materialize out of thin air. "Pretty fast, I guess. We're on our way to the airport," I added, hoping this would gain me clemency.

The cop peered into the passenger seat, where Homer's carrier jostled around, seemingly of its own volition, like a thing possessed. "What's in there?" he asked.

"My cat," I replied. "It took me forever to get him in there and now we're running a little late."

The officer's gaze took in the two other carriers containing Vashti and Scarlett, which now rested on the laps of Felix and Tony, who smiled winningly. "You should have left a little earlier," he said, and trundled off to his car to write up the ticket.

"We're going to miss the flight," Tony said, as the minutes rolled by and the cop still hadn't returned with what I had to assume was a lengthy manifesto on the history and future of traffic tickets—because why else was it *taking him so long to write the damn thing?*

"We'll make it," I assured him. "We'll make it because we have to."

The cop finally returned with the ticket and an admonition to “slow down,” which was wholly disregarded as I bore down on the accelerator once the police car had disappeared into traffic. Homer’s cries were beginning to sound a touch hoarse, but they continued unabated all the way to my parents’ house. Tony and Felix donned the headphones of the portable CD players they’d brought with them for the plane ride.

Probably the only person I know who’s more compulsive about punctuality than I am is my mother. She flung open the front door as soon as she heard my car pull into the driveway, with a cry of “*David! They’re here!*” to my father in the interior of the house. “You’re so late,” she clucked as I grabbed Homer’s twitching carrier and got out of the car, followed by Tony and Felix. They pulled their bags from the trunk of my car and loaded them into my parents’. “Why didn’t you leave earlier?”

I shot her a look. “Let’s just go.”

Scarlett and Vashti had apparently resigned themselves to their fate, for they remained silent on the car ride to the airport. Homer kept up his caterwauling, which had become a loud, continuous howl that only subsided when he ran out of breath.

Tony, Felix, and I were wedged in the backseat of my parents’ car. My mother turned around from her position in the front passenger seat and, raising her voice over Homer’s cries, said tearfully, “I can’t believe you’re leaving. I’m going to miss you so much.”

“What?” I replied. “I can’t hear you.”

“I said, *I’m going to miss you so much!*”

“Oh!” I responded. “*Me too!*”

My father made good time and, miraculously, we arrived at the airport within thirty minutes of our flight. “No time for big good-byes,” my father said as he hustled our luggage to a skycap. I slung Homer over my shoulder and fiercely hugged each of my parents in turn. Then Tony, Felix, and I pulled out our tickets and ran through the terminal for the metal detectors.

The people around us in line gave us a wide berth as Homer continued to howl and tear at his carrier from the inside. A few of them threw me openly disapproving looks, and I knew they were thinking, *I hope she's not on my flight.*

"That's a lot of cats you got there," the security guard observed as we prepared to load the three of them onto the X-ray machine's conveyor belt. I dug around in my bag and retrieved the cats' health certificates, which I handed over to her for a cursory glance.

"We're the Pussy Galore Tour," Felix said brightly. "Maybe you've heard of us."

"Oh, yeah." A slow grin broke over the security guard's face. "That *does* sound kinda familiar." She peered into the carrier containing Vashti, who gazed back with abject misery scrawled on her face. "This one's a beauty! Is she the star of the show?"

"There are no small roles," Tony told the guard very seriously. "Only small cats."

I rolled my eyes as I passed through the metal detector. "C'mon, guys," I said as I retrieved Homer. "We have to hurry."

We made a mad dash for the gate and were panting by the time we got to it. I reached again into my bag and produced a small vial containing the cat tranquilizers the vet had suggested I dispense before boarding.

Felix and Tony instantly perked up. "Are those for us?" Felix asked.

"No, they're for the cats," I replied.

"Don't you think it would be easier if we tranquilized ourselves and left the cats alone?" Tony said.

None of the cats was ever enthusiastic about taking pills, but Scarlett and Vashti swallowed their tranquilizers with a minimum of fuss. I was half convinced they had some inkling of what lay ahead, and figured the best way to face it was unconscious.

Homer was another story. As soon as I unzipped the top of his carrier, he made a desperate break for freedom. I had to fight to

keep him contained, and finally Felix held the carrier closed around Homer's neck with both of his hands while I patiently pried Homer's jaws open, placed the tiny pill on the back of his tongue, and softly stroked his throat to encourage him to swallow. I held his mouth closed for a minute or two, then released him.

Homer promptly spat the pill onto the ground.

"Come on, Homer," I said. "Do it for Mommy." I once again opened Homer's mouth and inserted the pill. I once again held his mouth closed and stroked his throat.

Homer once again spat the pill out.

I was getting desperate. The events of the entire morning had frazzled me, to say the least, and if Homer was this unhappy now, I couldn't imagine what he would be like unsedated on the plane. I tried three more times to give him his tranquilizer, holding his mouth closed for so long I was afraid I'd suffocate him. He turned his head vigorously from side to side in an attempt to shake me off. I sprinkled some catnip into his carrier, I rolled the pill into a small bit of turkey from one of the sandwiches I'd packed, I even tried dissolving it in a bottlecap of water, which Homer not only refused to drink, but nosed out of my hand so that it spilled on the floor. *No! I don't want it!*

I'd always known Homer was stubborn, that he was a cat who knew his own mind, but this was the first time I'd seen that stubbornness turned full force against *me*. I had my agenda, and Homer had his, and the two were obviously not in sync.

But I could be as stubborn as he was. One way or another, the two of us were getting to New York that day.

By now, the plane had been boarding for several minutes and Tony, Felix, and I were the only ones left at the gate. "What should we do?" Tony asked uncertainly.

I took a deep breath. *Steady*, I told myself. "He'll have to fly without it, I guess."

The struggle over the pill had had the one benefit of quieting Homer's crying. He wasn't even rattling his carrier anymore as we boarded the plane. But as soon as I stowed him beneath the seat in front of me, and he felt the thrum of the plane's engine through the floor, he started up again.

"Would you like a cocktail before takeoff?" the resolutely cheerful flight attendant asked as I buried my face in my hands.

"God, yes," I replied. She brought me a vodka with cranberry juice, which I downed in a single gulp, hastily requesting another. Thank the Lord for first class.

THE FLIGHT FROM Miami to Atlanta, where we would pick up our connecting flight to New York, was brief. Homer's cries by now had deepened into a low, mournful tone I'd never heard from him before. His ears were so much more sensitive than other cats' to begin with, and I could only imagine how painful the change in air pressure was for him as the plane ascended. As soon as the FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign was turned off, I pulled Homer's carrier out from under the seat in front of me and cradled it on my lap. I unzipped it just enough to reach a hand in, and Homer cuddled and nuzzled against it with a desperation that surpassed even the occasions he'd believed me to be angry with him. His cries took on the contrite yips he made when trying to make up with me. *Please let me out. Please make it stop. I'll be good! I promise I'll be good!*

If I could have stuffed myself into his carrier, given him my seat, and borne his pain for him, I would have considered it a fair trade. How could he know, how could he possibly understand, why I was subjecting him to all this? "Good boy," I murmured as I rubbed his aching ears. "Good boy, good boy, good boy ..."

Once I'd had my third drink and the plane leveled, a soothing sense of inevitability descended on me. We were on our way now. I continued to stroke Homer's head, which calmed him a bit. I

ignored the filthy looks a few of my fellow passengers shot us as Homer's cries continued, softer, yet unceasing.

The plane began its descent into Atlanta sooner than I would have liked. I tensed slightly; I had gone to college in Atlanta, and I knew how enormous the airport was. My hope was that our connecting flight wouldn't be too far from where we arrived. To my horror, when the flight attendant announced the gates for connecting flights, I discovered that we were landing at an A gate and flying to New York from Concourse D. We had roughly fifteen minutes between flights—how could we possibly make it?

My seat was closest to the front of the plane, and I waited impatiently, bouncing on the balls of my feet, for Tony and Felix to emerge. "We have to run, guys," I told them. "Like, seriously, we have to run *now!*"

Tony and Felix took off in one direction while I bolted in the other. "No!" I called to their retreating backs. "This way, *this way!*"

The three of us tore through the airport, each with a bouncing carrier slung over one shoulder. "Here's the train to Concourse D," Tony shouted, slowing down at the empty track.

"There's no time to wait for it," I said desperately. "We have to keep going. Hurry!"

We sprinted as if all the devils of hell were chasing us, past slow walkers and cleaning staff, and occasionally bumping into a hapless bystander who popped unexpectedly into our path. *Excuse me, excuse me*, we muttered breathlessly, over and over again. Vashti and Scarlett didn't budge inside their carriers, regarding the passing scenery through glazed, half-closed eyes. Homer, who had never been in his carrier for more than forty-five minutes at a stretch, and who had certainly never been bounced around so vigorously, wailed piteously. "Who schedules these things so far apart?" Felix wondered aloud, gasping painfully.

"Some sadist who works for the airline," I called over my shoulder.

We arrived at our connecting flight just as they were closing the gate. “Wait, we’re here! We’re here!” I announced to the woman behind the counter. I bent over to catch my breath and rub a cramp in my side as I shoved our tickets and the cats’ health certificates at her. My brow was slick with sweat, and I inadvertently dampened the papers as I drew the back of my hand across my forehead, trying to keep the sweat from dripping into my eyes.

“You really should try to arrive at the gate at least fifteen minutes before departure,” the woman at the counter informed me with cold asperity.

I was positive that my restraint in not decking her guaranteed me a spot in heaven.

This time, I was seated next to an older woman who was also traveling with a cat. “I see they put us together,” she said happily as I settled into my seat and stowed Homer in front of me, still fighting to catch my breath. “You wouldn’t believe how hard it was for us to get a seat on this flight! And I had to upgrade to first class! All the other spots for cats were already taken. Did you ever hear of such a thing?”

I mumbled something indistinct.

“This is Otis,” she continued, indicating the dignified-looking ginger tabby who snoozed peacefully in the carrier at her feet. “He’s a good flier. We make this trip twice a year to visit my grandchildren.”

“This is Homer,” I told her. Homer was once again struggling furiously within the confines of his carrier. He responded to the sound of his name with an agonized lowing that was so loud, we almost didn’t hear the announcement to fasten our seat belts. “Homer’s never flown before.”

“Poor little thing,” the woman said. She lowered her head a bit to get a better look at him through the mesh of the carrier. “Don’t cry, Homer. It’ll be over sooner than you think.”

We chatted comfortably as the plane began its climb. I told her all about Homer, about his usual bravery and how out of character all

the fuss he was making was. “I’m so sorry he’s making all this noise,” I apologized.

She laughed. “Wait till you’re traveling with a baby.” I suddenly realized, in a moment that had all the settling heaviness of a truth long known yet only now understood, that this wasn’t just a trip I was taking. I was flying into my future, a future so indistinct and shapeless as to be completely unrecognizable to me. I had lived nearly thirty years in the same city, and now, after only a few weeks’ thought and planning, I was grafting the entirety of my life onto a new and strange place. I had a vision of myself, sometime years and decades from now, traveling with a cat who wasn’t Homer to visit grandchildren of my own. I would pat the arm of some nervous young woman sitting next to me and tell her, *Dahlink, this is nothing. You have no idea what the years will bring ...*

Homer wailed again, jolting me from my reverie. “Can’t you shut that thing up?” demanded an irate man behind us.

“Have some compassion, sir!” the woman next to me snapped. She turned to fix a stern eye on him. “The poor cat’s never flown before. What’s *your* excuse for bad manners?”

My eyes filled with tears, and I impulsively seized her hand. “Thank you!” I said.

She squeezed my hand back in a motherly fashion. “Some people act as if a cat didn’t deserve any sympathy at all.”

The moment I saw the Statue of Liberty and the towers of the World Trade Center pass beneath my window was one of the happiest of my life. Even learning—after landing and waiting forty minutes at the baggage carousel—that our luggage hadn’t made the connecting flight, and wouldn’t arrive until sometime the next day, didn’t faze me.

I felt as if I had spent the day being pummeled like a punching bag, but Felix and Tony were remarkably fresh. Scarlett and Vashti had been no trouble at all, they told me. I thanked them profusely for having made the voyage with me, and then they disappeared

into cabs bound for the friends and relatives they'd be visiting while in New York.

I loaded my three cats into a cab of our own and directed it to our new apartment. I had purchased a litter box, litter, food, and bowls when I'd been in New York two weeks earlier to sign the lease, and had left everything with my building's doorman. I had also ordered a new bed and sheets, and my friend Richard, who lived in the building and had helped me land the apartment, had supervised their delivery. The rest of my furniture wouldn't arrive for a few days.

The doorman provided a luggage cart and helped me wrangle the cats and all their apparatus up to our apartment on the thirty-first floor. The second the door was closed behind me, I unzipped each of the cats' carriers. Scarlett and Vashti were still groggy from the effects of the tranquilizer, and they ambled around in a befuddled way before falling in a heap together in front of the radiator.

Homer appeared bewildered, but grateful to be out of his carrier and on solid ground once again. Every other time we'd moved, Homer had sprung from his carrier, eager to explore his new surroundings. This time, however, he was more cautious. Something felt very different about this move, and it wasn't just the day he'd spent in his carrier or the grueling trip he'd endured.

Once I'd set up food and litter, and carried Homer over to show him where they were, I tossed sheets and blankets onto the bed haphazardly and collapsed onto it face-first. *We made it*, I thought. *We're in New York*.

Homer was still creeping slowly about the room. The air was dry and cold, and his fur crackled with static electricity. From my purse I pulled Homer's stuffed worm, which I'd wrapped up and carried with me. I hadn't wanted it to get lost in a moving box; I thought Homer would feel better if there was something immediately familiar that he could reconnect with once we arrived.

For once, though, Homer wasn't overjoyed to greet his old friend. He gave the worm a perfunctory sniff and carefully dragged it next

to his food bowl. Then he resumed his measured pace about the apartment.

It had been thirteen hours since the moving van had arrived that morning to start my day, and the only thing I wanted was another thirteen hours, uninterrupted, in the warmth and comfort of my bed. Vashti, Scarlett, and I dozed, but Homer had no intention of resting. There was still something about this place that didn't make sense, something that had to be figured out. He couldn't stop until he knew what it was.

He was a cat who hadn't slept in the city that never sleeps. Homer was already a New Yorker.



18 • Cool For Cats

**Strangers and foreigners are under Zeus's protection, and will
take what they can get and be thankful.**

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

MY MANHATTAN APARTMENT WAS A STUDIO—A LARGE ONE BY NEW YORK standards, at something like 750 square feet plus a tiny outdoor “terrace”—but a studio nonetheless. Studio-apartment living took some getting used to, although the transition proved easier for me than it did for my cats. Homer was particularly put out, unable to grasp the concept of a home that consisted of a single room. Scarlett and Vashti, much as they initially disliked their sudden space restriction, could plainly see that, indeed, their living area had contracted to the confines of four walls and a bathroom. But it took Homer weeks to settle down. He was more rambunctious than the other two, and suddenly found his play space unaccountably diminished. I think he believed there *must* be a door to another room somewhere, if only he could find it, and he would skim along the walls of the apartment, nose to the ground and ears high in the air as he tried to detect the slightest clue as to where the rooms that surely lay beyond were hidden. He would meow in a throaty, irritable sort of way, as if demanding, *Why won't anybody tell me where the rest of this place is?*

Looking for an outlet for Homer's energetic high spirits, I resorted to store-bought toys for the first time since Homer was a kitten. He was uninterested in most of them, naturally, except for one—a plastic wheel containing a plastic ball. There were slits along the top and sides of the wheel through which a cat could reach to push around the ball inside.

Homer was quickly obsessed. The ball made a satisfying whiz and rattle as it hurtled through the wheel, but Homer—unable to see how completely contained the ball was within the wheel—was convinced that he could figure out a way to liberate it. He would burrow under the wheel, turn it on its side, push it from one end of the room to the other, then sigh loudly in exasperation when the ball steadfastly refused to come out. Sometimes he would sneak up on it, crouching down and pouncing from clear across the room, as if hoping to surprise the wheel into relaxing its grip on the ball.

Scarlett and Vashti, who also found this toy intriguing, seemed perplexed at the sheer volume of hours that Homer could devote to this new pastime. Scarlett, especially, would observe him at work on the toy with a kind of amused disgust. *Clearly, you can't get the ball out of the wheel*, she seemed to be thinking. *There's no point in being undignified about it*. Sometimes, Homer would creep out of bed at three or four in the morning to try it again, filling our small apartment with the sounds of the ball whooshing and the wheel flipping over and over as Homer butted it around with his head. It kept me up many a night, but I felt guilty about taking the toy away from him. *We only have the one room*, I would think. *Where else is he supposed to play?*

I paid dearly for that studio, more than I felt comfortable claiming I could afford, but the location was unquestionably convenient. Not only was I within a block of my office, but living all the way down at the southernmost tip of the island as I did, just about every subway line in the city came right to my door. I could be all the way up on the Upper East Side or the Upper West Side—and any and all points in between—in less than twenty minutes, faster than people I knew who lived farther uptown and were, technically, closer to

those locations than I was. And, no matter where I was in the city, I could always orient myself back home by looking for the World Trade Center. I'd been used to living in the city I had grown up in, a place that I knew so intuitively, I'd never had to consult a map in my life. Learning my way around Manhattan was a challenge, but I always had some sense of where I was in relation to where I lived simply by consulting the skyline. This was true even in maze-like neighborhoods like SoHo or the West Village, where the streets were named instead of numbered and would otherwise have been hopeless for a newcomer to make any sense out of.

I spent a great deal of time with Andrea and Steve, the boyfriend who was now officially her fiancé, and their circle of friends. I made one trip back to Miami, for Tony's birthday, a month after I'd moved, and Andrea introduced me to her pet-sitter, Garrett. When I'd lived in Miami and traveled, my cats had always been cared for either by my parents or by some friend who Homer already knew, one who lived close enough to pop in and out once a day. But Manhattan was a place that made quick visits inconvenient and so, despite apprehensions about turning my cats and my home over to the care of a stranger, I decided to call in a professional.

Garrett came over to meet us before my trip, and I went through my customary introduction ritual with Homer, holding Garrett's hand in mine and bringing the two hands together under Homer's nose. I left him with lengthy and detailed instructions: The windows and balcony door were *always* to remain closed; food dish and water bowl had to be separated enough so that Homer couldn't toss the contents of one into the other; et cetera. I couldn't help it; my habit of worrying about Homer, of fretting irrationally over his safety far more than I did over Scarlett's and Vashti's, was too deeply ingrained. I tried not to be more skittish than Garrett's typical clients—although I'm sure I was—but Garrett was an unusually patient man, and he and Homer seemed charmed with each other from the beginning. "We're going to be buddies, aren't we, Homer?" Garrett said, and Homer brought over his stuffed worm to drop it at Garrett's feet—his highest stamp of approval.

I called Garrett each day that I was gone, and he left written notes on the kitchen counter every time he visited. They went something like this:

DAY 1: *Changed food, water, litter. Gray guy hid under the bed, white guy seemed happy to see me, played worm fetch with Homer for half an hour.*

DAY 2: *Changed food, water, litter. Gray guy hid under the bed. White guy wouldn't stop dipping paws in fresh water. Homer threw a can of tuna out of the kitchen cabinet so I fed it to them. Hope that was okay.*

I preserved these notes for some weeks after I returned, hanging them on my refrigerator with magnets. I felt like a parent receiving her children's first report cards, with detailed accounts of who had been a good sharer or who played well with others. Although I'd had plenty of corroboration over the years, it still felt good to realize that I wasn't the only one who found Homer irresistible.

IT HAD BEEN January when I began interviewing for jobs in New York and February when I moved, and everybody—including the HR guy at the company that hired me—told me I was crazy to move from South Beach to New York, especially in the dead of winter. “But it's warm in Miami *all the time*,” they would say, as if this simple and single fact rendered all other considerations moot.

With all the changes in our life and circumstances that moving to New York brought, I think it was the cold that was the hardest adjustment for the cats. Even the smell of the gas that powered the stoves and ovens in our building, which bothered the life out of Homer those first few weeks (every home we'd had in Miami had functioned solely on electrical power), wasn't as much of a shock as the ubiquitous cold.

I remembered how, as a six-year-old child visiting New York at Thanksgiving with my parents for the first time, cold air—cold air *outside*—had been a revelation to me. I'd read books, of course, where characters lived in places like New York or Chicago or London and had to bundle up beneath coats and scarves when they

went outdoors. But I'd had no physical sense of what that would feel like. Cold, in my own experience, was something that lived inside refrigerators, or that was pumped mechanically into your home through air-conditioning units. Going to Macy's with my mother, the vastness of the floor that sold winter jackets and coats—with its overpowering smell of leather; I had never smelled so much leather in one place—reduced me almost to the point of awe. So many people must live in New York! And, naturally, all of them would need heavy coats. Because it was cold here. Cold *outside*.

Scarlett, Vashti, and Homer didn't have even the theoretical knowledge of cold to prepare themselves with. The cold weather dried the air out, and their fur was always full of static electricity. Scarlett and Vashti took this in stride, but Homer found it terribly disconcerting. He would walk across the throw rug on the floor to jump into my lap, eagerly pressing his nose against mine, only to find that the contact produced a small electric shock. He would turn his face to me reproachfully, as if to say, *Hey! What'd you do that for?*

My apartment had a heater, but it was on the fritz and would periodically emit a sharp buzz followed by a resounding *CLANK! CLONK CLANK!* The heater soon became Homer's sworn enemy. No matter how soundly asleep Homer was, he leapt to attention when he heard its racket. He had become very protective of me since the break-in and would jump to stand in front of me, his back fully arched, and growl in the heater's direction. After a minute he would creep cautiously toward it, rake at it furiously with his claws a few times, and then—confident he'd shown that heater a thing or two—slink over to curl warily in my lap. But within an hour, the heater would clank and clonk once again.

My building super eventually replaced the heater with one that didn't bang around quite as much but, even when it was operating at full force, my apartment was never what one might call balmy. My cats and I became very close that first winter in New York, huddling together for warmth. The smallness of my new apartment, which had caused so much initial consternation, soon came to feel

like a blessing. Even Scarlett became a cuddler. This might have been good news for Homer—who, much as he disliked having less room to play in, was overjoyed that the four of us were together all the time—if only Scarlett had been gracious about sharing.

At first, in her usual peremptory fashion, she tried to keep Vashti and Homer from getting too close to me. Scarlett may have discovered the joys of near-constant snuggling with Mommy, but she always hated more physical contact with the other two cats than was strictly necessary. She would bat angrily at Homer's and Vashti's heads if she was in my lap and one of them tried to curl up beside me. Homer, who was always somewhere close to me and who had clearly come to regard himself as mature enough not to have to submit to Scarlett's thralldom anymore, would slap right back at her. *You're not the boss of me!* Occasionally, they got into downright fights that I had to break up by physically separating them. But eventually Scarlett learned to respect Homer's space, albeit grudgingly. Homer was nearly five years old now and wedded enough to his habits, more so than even the most habit-centered cat, that he wasn't about to be displaced just because Scarlett had had a come-to-Jesus moment in her philosophy of physical affection.

Vashti, however—who was neither as aggressive as Scarlett nor as persistent as Homer—found herself crowded out. I had to make a concerted point of ensuring that she got her fair share of lap-time. Still, Vashti wasn't as happy as she'd been in Miami, and I felt guilty at times, worried that she was becoming the classic neglected middle child.

It was the first snowfall that brought Vashti around. Scarlett was captivated as it blew against the windows. She threw her upper body at the glass and did everything she could to catch the white stuff in her paws through the panes. She didn't know what snow was—she didn't realize that snow was *cold*. All she knew was that little flakes of things danced tantalizingly in front of her from the other side of the window glass, begging to be caught and played with.

But Vashti had been bred for snow—with her long white fur, her luxurious plume of a tail like that of an arctic fox, and her miniature snowshoes in the form of the little tufts of white fur that grew lush between the pads of her feet. She seemed to have an inborn memory of what snow was and what it would feel like. Perhaps that was why she'd always been so fascinated with water. As the snow piled up on our balcony, Vashti stood before the balcony door and pleaded mutely with her eyes for me to let her out into it. I did a few times, and she hurled herself into the middle of the deepest drifts. Her pupils were wide and wild and the only sign of darkness in the white-on-white landscape she created as she gamboled around and all but buried herself. It was only when a large gust of wind would come along that I could coax her back inside. Vashti may have loved snow, but wind terrified her and always drove her indoors.

It was around the time of the first snowfall that Homer discovered the magical world of under-the-covers. In Miami, he'd been content to cuddle with me on top of the blankets. But he was smaller than Scarlett and Vashti, and lying with me on top of the covers didn't keep him nearly warm enough now. He would burrow as far beneath the covers as he could, purring from between my feet and generating as much warmth as a tiny space heater. Scarlett and Vashti, not always realizing he was under there, would jump up to join me and frequently landed directly on his head. Homer hadn't landed inadvertently on another cat since he was a kitten. It was now his turn to wonder why the other two cats couldn't tell where he was—how come everybody knew where he was most of the time, but sometimes it was like they didn't know he was there at all? Homer would leap to his feet indignantly beneath the blankets, squawking a complaint.

I don't know if he couldn't tell when I wasn't lying beneath blankets, or if he simply refused to accept that they weren't there, but if I happened to be lying on the couch without a blanket over me, Homer would claw in frustration at my clothes. If I wore a baggy-enough sweatshirt, he would worm his way beneath it, poking his head out of the neck of my shirt and resting it on my

shoulder, the rest of his body purring with loud contentment against my chest. I'd read aloud to him from whatever book I was in the middle of, and he would nuzzle happily against my neck until he fell into such a deep sleep that even his purring stopped. All that was left was the sound of his breath whistling past my ear, and the sound of the snow falling against the windows.

Spring came eventually, as spring is apt to do, and if there's anything more gorgeous than Manhattan in springtime, I've never seen it. I had grown up in a city of flowers (*Florida* is actually Spanish for *land of flowers*), but the blooms that sprang riotously from trees and bushes and flower beds in New York City dazzled me, seeming to tumble unexpectedly in the profusion of a single day. The air grew less dry, Homer's coat lost its static electricity, and Scarlett, almost cheerfully, made room for him beside me on the couch. Only Vashti sat longingly before the windows, her eyes scanning the horizon and the clear, sundrenched view of the streets below.

What? she seemed to ask. *No more snow?*



19 • A Hole in the Sky

We wept and lifted up our hands to heaven on seeing such a
horrid sight, for we did not know what to do.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

THERE ARE EARLY-FALL DAYS IN NEW YORK SO STAGGERINGLY BEAUTIFUL, so laden with the promise of fall beauty still to come, that to experience them is, you tell yourself, worth all the money and hassle, all the striving and frenzy, that it takes simply to live in Manhattan. The leaves are still green and the air hasn't turned cool yet, but it isn't hot anymore, either. There's a crispness to it that siphons off the brown industrial haze that hovers over the skyline during the humid days of July and August, leaving the air as clear and crystalline as God ever intended.

It was on the morning of one such day, at around eight fifteen, when I found myself facing an empty cat food bowl, an emptier cupboard, and a dilemma. I typically fed the cats a premium dry food (Vashti had developed food allergies, and the only brands that didn't trigger them were, naturally, the most expensive) supplemented by a can of moist food made by the same manufacturers (I had also learned that the more expensive the moist food, the less likely it was to make Homer gassy). Occasionally I fed them a can of the cheapest cat food out there, because my cats loved

the cheap stuff with all the ardor of a child who'd much rather eat McDonald's than her mother's healthier home-cooked meals. But I had nothing on hand at the moment, not even a can of tuna that could substitute as a festive, hasty meal in a pinch.

I could rush out now to the little gourmet grocery store across the street and refill their food before leaving for work. While they didn't sell the specific brand I liked, I could buy a small box of a good-enough brand that would be gentle on Vashti's sensitive system and hold us over for a day or two.

Or I could wait a few hours until lunchtime, walk over to the pet store that was closer to Broadway, buy the better food, and dart back to my apartment to feed them then. My office was only a block away from my apartment, and only three blocks from the pet store, and I had made this round trip often enough. Living so close to my office, I hated the idea of being even five minutes late to work—feeling that I had no excuse not to walk in punctually at the dot of nine every morning. So it was usually during lunch that I made these midweek pet food runs. Besides, I liked to visit my cats midday. It was about the only free luxury my life in New York offered, and the cats—particularly Homer—always treated these spontaneous midday appearances like a holiday.

In the end, it was the complete emptiness of their food bowl that convinced me. I had sometimes gone to work leaving them with only a little food, but never leaving them without anything. Vashti sat next to the bowl and squeaked at me in a beseeching, yet pointed, way. *No food at all?* she seemed to ask. *You'd really leave us with no food at all?* Sighing at my own lack of foresight for not having stocked up on supplies over the weekend (I was running dangerously low on kitty litter as well), I grabbed my purse and headed out.

The street in front of my Financial District apartment was one of the oldest in New York, and so narrow that I could cross it in fewer than five steps. The line at the grocery store's cash register was long, as it always was in the mornings when nine-to-fivers grasped for their coffee as if it were a draught of sweet life itself. But the queue

moved efficiently, and barely fifteen minutes had passed before I was once again in my apartment.

I had just emptied the entire box of food into their bowl, with all three cats seated in an eager semi-circle around me, when there was an enormous, muffled *BOOM!* It was more felt than heard, like the vibrations caused by a speaker with the bass turned all the way up. My apartment building shook slightly, and a few kernels of food spilled from the bowl onto the floor. Scarlett and Vashti darted under the bed so fast, it was as if a chain had been yanked that jerked them under. Homer leapt to stand in front of me, all his hackles raised, his nose sniffing the air as his ears moved from side to side. He growled a warning to whatever this invisible menace was. *Stay back*, the growl said. *Stay away from us ...*

“It’s okay, little boy,” I said, stroking his back. “It was just a car backfiring. There’s nothing you have to protect Mommy from.”

Homer didn’t like it. For no reason at all that I could discern, he didn’t like it. He ran from corner to corner of the apartment, hackles and ears still at full attention, a sentry securing a perimeter. Every so often, he would come to stand in front of me, continuing his growl. Scarlett and Vashti were equally unnerved, refusing to put so much as a whisker out from under the bed. By the time I lured them out, it was a minute or two past nine o’clock. It looked as if, for the first time since I had started my job in New York, I was going to be a few minutes late after all.

I had slung my purse over my shoulder when the second *BOOM!* came, shaking our building once again. This time, the cats couldn’t be comforted. My apartment was a corner unit, with windows facing north and east, and Homer leapt to the sill of the westernmost of the northern-facing windows, hissing wildly.

There was snarled traffic and endless construction work around my building all the time, and the very narrowness of the streets—surrounded like a canyon with buildings that stretched thirty, forty, fifty stories high—echoed and magnified random sounds beyond their actual volume, even all the way up where I lived on the thirty-

first floor. So I truly wasn't worried about anything at that point beyond how upset the cats were. I hated to leave them in that state, but what could I do? I certainly couldn't call my boss and tell him I was taking the morning off because my cats were upset.

So I left them, Homer still hissing at the window, Vashti and Scarlett huddled up beneath the bed.

The lobby of my building was serene as I dropped three pairs of pants with the on-site dry cleaner and crossed toward the front door. Tom, my doorman, usually waved a cheerful goodbye to me, but today he was on the phone, speaking in a hushed, anxious murmur. His expression was pained, and I remember feeling a fleeting sympathy for him as I passed. Tom was a good man; I hoped that whoever he was talking to wasn't delivering bad news.

The street in front of my building was as crowded as it had been earlier, when I'd darted out to get the cat food. There were people everywhere. They stood on sidewalks, in doorways, and in the middle of the street itself. But now, the street wasn't the buzzing hive of rush-hour activity it had been less than an hour ago. These people standing here now were completely frozen. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. It was as if wax figures from a museum had come to life, wandered out into the streets, and then simply decided to stop and resume their waxy poses where they stood. The only noise I could hear was what sounded like the sirens of a thousand fire trucks, spilling over one another and competing to be the first to blare their panic into the early-fall air.

The silence and stillness of that Manhattan street, in the heart of the Financial District, at the height of rush hour, was the first time that day when—still not knowing why—I felt a creeping fear. Everybody was looking in the same direction—due west. Of course I turned, to see what they were all looking at.

The World Trade Center was on fire.

The towers were etched against the perfect blue of the morning sky, and they were on fire. They loomed over everything, appearing to be five feet from me rather than the five blocks they actually

were. Black smoke billowed up, and shards of glass and debris fluttered down, as gracefully as the fall leaves that were only a few weeks away. Then I saw what couldn't be, it couldn't possibly be—and yet it was, it *was*—a man on fire, falling from one of the highest floors. He didn't fall in the elegant spiral of the debris, but in a straight-down plummet.

My stomach contracted into a painful dry heave and I retched, suddenly grateful that I hadn't eaten breakfast.

The people around me had seen it, too, and many of them turned to clutch the arms or bury their faces in the shoulders of those standing closest to them. From the stiff, automatic way in which these gestures were received, I guessed that some of those grabbed were strangers to the people who'd grabbed them.

I didn't want to touch anybody, and I didn't want anybody to touch me. There would be an indisputable reality in human contact, like when you say to somebody, *Pinch me*, so that you know you're not dreaming. Holding myself as carefully stiff as something carved from wood, I walked the block to my office.

The message light on my phone was already blinking, and the phone itself rang incessantly. My co-workers were speaking quietly, clustered in groups of two and three around the windows in our office that faced onto the World Trade Center. *A plane hit it. A small plane. But how could a pilot not see ... got disoriented ... an accident ... a horrible accident ...*

The windows from my own desk looked directly onto the World Trade Center. The black smoke still gushed upward. I saw helicopters weave through the smoke, circling ... circling. Helicopters have always been the paranoiac's symbol of government omnipotence, gliding with sleek menace through movies about evil federal conspiracies or dystopic futuristic societies. Now I thought that I had never seen anything as helpless-looking as those helicopters, small hatchlings continually repulsed from their nest. *There's no way they can land*, I thought. *How will they get those people out?*

The first call I made was to my mother. I felt an absurd need to announce to somebody that I was okay—even though, obviously, I was okay. This was something that was happening to other people, to the ones in the World Trade Center. Not to me.

Once I heard my mother's voice on the phone, I felt comforted. "Don't look at it," she instructed. Obediently, I drew down the shade over my window.

My next phone call was to Tony in Miami, who was watching the story unfold on the local news. "They're saying it was terrorists," Tony said.

"Don't be ridiculous," I replied immediately—and it wasn't denial. I really meant it. Terrorists! Who could believe such an absurdity? The people putting forth this theory were of the same ilk as the ones who believed the government was hiding little green men in the deserts of New Mexico. "Of course it wasn't terrorists. It was an accident."

"Gwen, they flew two huge passenger jets into those buildings on purpose," Tony insisted. "I'm watching the film footage on the news *right now*."

The PA system in my office building, the one that informed us of fire drills or elevator outages, began to spit and crackle. The Jamaican-accented voice of the security guard downstairs came on, only it didn't have the jovial resonance of the voice that greeted me every morning with a "Hello! Good morning, miss!" This voice sounded strained and awful. Our building was being evacuated, the voice said, and would not reopen that day. We were to proceed calmly to the emergency stairs and exit the building as quickly as possible.

"I have to go now," I told Tony. "I'll call you later, okay?" It felt odd, I thought, to go through the polite formalities of hanging up on my friend when the voice over the PA had just told us, in a way his words hadn't, that we were all being instructed to run for our lives.

A co-worker named Sharon stopped by my desk. Sharon was a few years older than I was and one of the directing partners of the

company I worked for. We had collaborated on a few projects and exchanged friendly enough words in passing, but had never spent time together socially outside of the office. “You live around here, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I told her. “I live a block away.”

“Why don’t you come with me,” she said. “I was going to walk over the Brooklyn Bridge and get a room at the Brooklyn Marriott. We can have drinks and call people to come over and meet us.” When I hesitated, she added, “You don’t want to go home and sit alone a few blocks away from all this.”

I’d had a half-formed idea that I might call Andrea or one of the handful of other friends I’d made since moving, on the chance that they, too, had been released from their offices. But going to see any of them would mean traveling all the way uptown. Getting into the subway or riding on a bus seemed unwise at the moment. The far side of the Brooklyn Bridge was actually much closer to my office than, say, Midtown Manhattan.

And I didn’t want to stray too far from my cats. Without really thinking about it, I was operating on the vague assumption that the fires would rage for a while until they were finally put out, at which time the dead would be collected and the grieving—bottomless, incalculable grieving—would begin.

But I also knew that, when all that had happened, and when I was tired of being with other people and talking over this thing, this horror, I would want to return to the quiet of my apartment, and to the warm certainty of the furry bodies of my cats.

So it was a relief, when Sharon extended this invitation, to feel that somebody else was taking charge. Sharon wasn’t exactly my boss, but she was one of the people I answered to and, moreover, had lived in New York her entire life. Sharon would know, better than I possibly could, what we were supposed to do.

The two of us walked the few blocks to the Brooklyn Bridge. Nobody else from the office joined us, and the thought occurred to me that Sharon’s invitation hadn’t been entirely casual, that she was

—for reasons that couldn’t be found in the very slight interaction we’d had thus far—looking out for me. Clearly, we were not the only ones who’d had the idea of leaving Manhattan; the Brooklyn Bridge was a solid wall of human flesh. It had been closed to vehicular traffic, and people were climbing up the sides of the railings to access the bridge, pulled up and over by pedestrians on the other side, rather than walking all the way down to the pedestrian entrance.

For all that there were thousands of people on that bridge, the crowd was strangely quiet. The word *terrorists* could be heard in almost every single murmured conversation, and I was now long past the point of disbelieving it. Then somebody near us said, “What if they blow up the bridge?”

It was a preposterous idea. The notion of somebody having the audacity to blow up the Brooklyn Bridge—the sheer impossibility of its disappearance from the New York skyline—was so absurd as to sound almost like the punch line to a bad joke.

Once introduced, however, it was an idea that was impossible to put from our minds. Sharon and I tried to distract ourselves by talking about the likelihood of finding a free room at the Brooklyn Marriott, and making lists of the people we would call to join us. Did it make more sense to stop for bottles of liquor on the way, or to pay the exorbitant prices that the hotel’s honor bar would surely levy? Our backs were turned to the World Trade Center, and our view was of nothing except thousands of people and the sanctuary of Brooklyn before us. As long as we walked and talked like normal people, speaking of normal things, the world was manageable.

The air was acrid with the smell of smoke. A woman walking near us limped slightly, and she complained—with a forced, aren’t-we-being-brave-about-this good humor—that if she’d known she’d have to walk so much today, she would have worn more practical shoes. Sharon and I smiled sympathetically, and were on the verge of responding, when a man streaked by, shouting, “*They blew up the Pentagon! They blew up the Pentagon!*”

We heard a colossal crack and groan. The bridge trembled, a vibration radiated from the soles of our feet up to our legs. They were blowing up the bridge! *They were blowing up the Brooklyn Bridge!* People began to scream and cry and rush and push, they knocked into other people and those people fell down and the people behind them kept running over them and Sharon and I grabbed on to each other to keep our footing. I wanted to scream, too, but there was no air in my lungs. There was no air anywhere. The Brooklyn Bridge was exploding, disintegrating, and I was standing on it!

Every muscle and tendon in my body strained to be yards and yards ahead of where I stood. The only thing that held my body back was the hard barrier of my skin, which stubbornly refused to go forward. My hands and legs shook with the desperate effort my body made to jump out of my skin and rush away, away, away from all this.

A flash of vision swam before my eyes, not of my own life, but of grainy black-and-white footage from Holocaust documentaries I'd seen. It was of a group of old Jewish men, lined up facing a wall. Each had his hand clasped in the hand of the man next to him, and they were praying—the prayer all Jews are supposed to say at the moment of their death. I could hear them as clearly as I heard anything around me, and then I heard my own voice—as if it were something separate and outside of myself, thick and unrecognizable—reciting with them: *Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai eh-chad* ...

Then everybody stopped abruptly, as if we had all been connected to a central power source whose plug had just been pulled. We had realized that the bridge wasn't disintegrating, hadn't been rent in half to spill us into the East River below. As one body, we all turned our heads to look back at the city we were fleeing.

One of the towers of the World Trade Center was collapsing inward upon itself. Within seconds, there was nothing left of it but a smoky hole in the skyline where it had stood. The smoke of the fire had been black, but the residue of the collapse was a shimmering

beige. It hung in poised perfection, like the afterbirth of fireworks, in the brilliant blue air.

“It’s okay,” I said to Sharon. “It’s okay. It’s just the tower collapsing.”

It was a ridiculous thing to say. What could be less “okay” than the collapse of a tower of the World Trade Center? And yet, in that moment, it *was* okay—not only because it meant that the Brooklyn Bridge hadn’t been blown up, but also because *it made sense*. Buildings burned, and then they fell down. What was the expression? *Burned to the ground*. I’d never seen it happen before, but I’d heard that expression all my life. *It burned to the ground*, some reporter would say. *Firefighters responded to the four-alarm fire but were unable to overcome the intensity of the blaze, and the warehouse burned to the ground*. This was a thing that happened all the time and everybody knew it and it made perfect sense.

Except it didn’t, of course. The thought that piled into my already overactive brain in the next millisecond was that there had been people in that building. Whatever hope had remained for rescuing those trapped in the fire was now gone. Again, reflexively, I began to pray, this time murmuring the Mourner’s Kaddish. *Yitgadal v’yitkadash sh’mae raba ...*

The ball of smoke held itself carefully aloft for a moment, a hooded cobra that swayed and hypnotized its victims with its eyes. We watched it, mesmerized. Then it began to descend and spread. It radiated outward in an opaque cloud of soot and debris that swallowed up everything in its path for blocks around—birds and trees and people and buildings.

The building where my cats still were.

My body followed the direction my head was already pointing in, and I began to push my way through the crowd that was now, with frightened cries and more determination than ever, heading into Brooklyn. “Excuse me,” I said politely. “Excuse me.” Weren’t you supposed to say *excuse me* to people as you pushed your way past them? They jostled against me, bumped into me hard, but that was

okay. I understood. They had to go one way, and I had to go the other. If I was patient and persistent enough, I would get through. Every time someone knocked into me, I repeated, "Excuse me."

Sharon grabbed my arm. "Gwen!" she shouted. "What are you doing? We have to go *this* way!" and she pointed vigorously in the direction of Brooklyn.

"*Let go of me!*" I began to fight a double battle against her grip and the crowd that wouldn't let me through back to Manhattan. "My cats are in there!"

"Gwen!" she shouted again. She grabbed my shoulders with both hands and shook me a bit, and I wondered, with a sort of detached and analytical interest, if she was going to slap me. Was I hysterical? I didn't *feel* hysterical. Despite my panic and my shrieking, I felt perfectly lucid. Sharon pointed again, at the remaining tower, which listed dangerously to one side. "Gwen, the other tower is going to collapse any second. *You cannot go back for your cats! We* have to keep going!"

Almost as soon as she said it, the second tower began to implode. People buried their faces in their hands, they covered their eyes, they sobbed and wailed. I felt dry-eyed and hollow as I watched a second beige ash monster merge with the first one. It had already reached the foot of the bridge, and nothing was visible of the city anymore.

"Your cats will be fine," Sharon said. "They're in your apartment, and they're safe, and they will be fine. I promise."

Broken windows, I thought. *Broken windows and a blind cat.*

"They're not going to let anybody off this bridge and back into the Financial District," Sharon continued. "This bridge is going one way, and that's the way we have to go."

Of course. I had made a stupid decision—an insanely, cataclysmically, unimaginably stupid decision—when I had first set foot onto the Brooklyn Bridge and left my cats behind. They were alone and unprotected, and it was my fault, my fault, my fault.

“We’ll figure it out when we get into Brooklyn,” Sharon said. There was a note of desperation in her voice. “We’ll make calls, we’ll find someone in your building, *and they will be fine.*”

We turned and walked toward Brooklyn once again. This time, there was no discussion of what we would do when we reached the Brooklyn Marriott. Without saying anything to each other, that plan had been scrapped. Our only goal now was to walk until we got out of reach of the soot cloud, which fell wrathfully upon us within minutes. Soon we could barely see or breathe; we took off our shirts and tied them around our faces in an attempt to filter the air. With the part of my mind that was numb and detached, I thought how astonishing it was that one minute you were in one of the most technologically advanced cities the world had ever produced, and a minute later you were any refugee of any war zone at any time or place in history, fleeing for your life on foot.

Our skin and hair were gray from the ash by the time we reached the far side of the bridge, and still we were in the thick of the cloud. We walked for miles. The rhythm of my footsteps echoed in my head. *My cats. My cats. My cats my cats my cats.* Somewhere in Brooklyn—I didn’t know where we were by now—a mechanic was standing in front of a garage, handing out surgical masks to people as they walked by. We nodded an acknowledgment to him, our throats sore with smoke and stunned into silence.

Eventually, we had walked so far that Sharon said we might as well keep going to her apartment in Bay Ridge, which was a good ten miles from where we’d started out that morning. “You’ll stay at my apartment,” she said. I was grateful, but it was more of an intellectual gratitude than an emotional one. I knew Sharon was doing a kind thing; where would I have gone, where would I have slept that night, if not for her? Yet I felt dissociated from all outcomes. What difference did it make where I went or where I stayed? The only thing that mattered was how I was going to get back.

I wanted to call my mother, to let her know I was all right, and I wanted to call my apartment building. But our cell phones weren’t

working. “My mother’s office is near my apartment,” Sharon said. “We can use the landline there.”

It was nearly two o’clock in the afternoon, according to Sharon’s watch, by the time we reached Bay Ridge. We had walked for almost five hours. We were now far enough away from Lower Manhattan to attract stares, covered as we were from head to toe in grayish beige ash. The streets were wide and clean, and the crowds were orderly. I noticed the order and the stares in a dim sort of way that didn’t connect to anything inside me. Things were happening around me, and I was aware of them, but I couldn’t participate in them or feel anything about them. It was like sitting in the backseat of a cab and watching the world rush by, knowing that you had no part in what was happening outside the cab’s windows.

It was in that same detached way that I watched Sharon’s mother grab her into a damp, tear-laden hug as we entered her office. Another woman who worked there showed me discreetly into an empty back office. “There’s a bathroom, if you want to wash up,” she said tentatively. I was wearing a sleeveless shirt, capri pants, and open-toed sandals, and the ash had settled into my skin until the one was indistinguishable from the other.

The first call I made was to my mother’s elementary school. “Thank God, thank God,” the receptionist breathed when she answered the phone and I identified myself. “Your mother’s in the teacher’s lounge. Some of the other teachers are sitting with her. I’ll let her know you’re on the phone.”

There was a brief hum of hold music—which struck me as another bizarre thing; why should something as innocuous as hold music still exist?—and then my mother was on the phone, and she was crying. She cried so hard that she couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe. Her sobs sounded more like howls and they were continuous, painful, as if something were being wrenched out of her body with brute force.

I hadn’t shed a single tear yet that day, and I didn’t want to. If I started to cry, I would break, and the most important thing now was

that my core remain firmly held together. But all the tears I hadn't cried rushed up into my throat to choke me, and my voice was thick as I repeated, "Mommy, don't cry. I'm okay. I'm okay, Mommy, don't cry."

One of the other teachers took the phone from her. "Tell me where you're staying," she said quietly. "We'll let her know."

I told her I'd be staying with my friend Sharon, and that I would call later with the phone number. After we hung up, I tried the front desk of my apartment building. There was no answer. I tried the apartments and cell phones of the handful of other tenants I knew in the building. Nobody was home. Nobody could be reached. The one hope I'd had left, that somebody at my building would answer and say, *Gosh, how silly you were to worry! Everything's peachy-keen here!* flickered out.

Broken windows, I thought. *Broken windows and a blind cat.*

Sharon and I walked the few additional blocks to her apartment—a homey, plant-and-sunlight-filled two-bedroom affair. We immediately turned on the TV. Sharon had been right; not only had both towers of the World Trade Center collapsed, but all the buildings in the plaza around the Trade Center had either collapsed or were about to. Manhattan was completely shut down below 14th Street. The perimeter had been barricaded. It was being guarded by the military, and the only ones allowed in were military personnel, police officers, firefighters, and rescue workers.

There was no point in thinking about broken windows. It was a counterproductive thought. I had to believe that my building was intact. The cats would be fine. I'd left them with plenty of food and water, and this would be no more to them than if I had gone away on an overnight business trip. Because surely, I thought, I'd be able to get to them tomorrow.

We knew we should shower, or eat, or do something, but Sharon and I couldn't pull ourselves away from that TV screen. They were playing cell phone messages from people who'd been trapped in the rubble of the collapsed buildings. *Their final words*, the reporter

intoned. The pain of it was insupportable, and Sharon grimly produced two bottles of vodka.

I drank as I had never drunk before. I wanted to drink until the bottle ached as much as I did, to drink until the room spun and I forgot my own name. I wanted to drink until I passed out. And, mercifully, I did.



20 • September 12, 2001

I took a wallet full of provisions with me, for my mind
misgave me that I might have to deal with some who would
be of great strength, and would respect neither right nor law.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

I SHOULD HAVE AWAKENED THE NEXT MORNING WITH A VICIOUS HANGOVER, but I didn't. In fact, I had never felt so clearheaded and single-minded of purpose in my life. It was as if my mind had spent its unconscious hours solving problems for me, so that by the time I woke up the process had resolved itself, and all that was left was the series of steps I would undertake.

A quick check with the news revealed several things. The first was that Lower Manhattan was still shut down, still barricaded, and still restricted to military and rescue personnel. The roads below 14th Street were closed to vehicular traffic, and the subways and buses weren't running down there—although the rest of the trains and buses in and around the city were essentially on schedule.

This meant my best shot at getting in would be on foot. I fired up Sharon's computer, consulted an online subway map, and plotted three separate routes that would get me as close to the sealed-off perimeter as public transportation would allow.

The news also informed me that there was no electricity or running water in Lower Manhattan. So if I did get to my cats, it would probably make sense for me to remove them from the apartment even if my building was intact. The four of us couldn't live indefinitely in an apartment that had no water and was accessible only by climbing thirty-one flights of stairs. I decided to call my friend Scott to see if he could put us up for a few days. Scott had recently moved from Miami to Philadelphia—only an hour and change by train outside of New York—where he lived alone in a three-bedroom town house. He was the kind of friend you went to in a crisis, and was also the only person I knew who had the space to accommodate all four of us. I wrote down Scott's name on the piece of paper with my subway routes, and next to his name I wrote *litter/litter box/cat food*, a reminder to myself that I should ask him to purchase these things ahead of our arrival. I would reimburse him when we got there.

Of course, it was possible that Scott wouldn't be able to receive us, at least not for a couple of days. Or maybe electricity would be restored, and it wouldn't be logical to take the cats all the way to Philly. In that case, I would need supplies—supplies I couldn't assume I would be able to get in my own neighborhood if the shops were all closed. I found a separate piece of paper and filled it with a list of the things I would need to buy. I also made a note to pull as much cash as I could out of an ATM. Cash, I had found, was always a good contingency plan in a crisis.

My last note to myself was to call the appropriate city and state agencies to see if anybody was organizing a rescue effort for pets trapped near what every news outlet was now calling Ground Zero. There was an emergency information phone number that flashed on the bottom of the TV screen, but after several calls all I got was a busy signal. It was probably better that way, I told myself. Let the government agencies attend to people. I would take care of my cats.

Sharon was still asleep when I poked my head in to check on her. I scrawled a note and propped it up on her bathroom mirror to let

her know where I was going. Then I pulled on my filthy clothes of the day before, grabbed her keys and my purse, and headed out.

The day was as clear and beautiful as the previous one had been. I expected my muscles to be stiff from all the walking I'd done yesterday, but they moved smoothly and eagerly in time with my thoughts—as if they, too, had been awaiting only daylight and consciousness to begin turning plan into action. I walked a few blocks up what appeared to be Bay Ridge's main thoroughfare until I came upon a large drugstore. There I purchased a cheap pair of jeans, two large T-shirts, underwear, a sturdy pair of inexpensive sneakers, socks, a toothbrush, deodorant, and soap. I also bought two gallons of water, a box of kitty litter, a large bag of off-brand cat food (Vashti might just have to be itchy from allergies for a few days), a flashlight and batteries, and the biggest backpack they had.

It was a job of work getting my haul back to Sharon's apartment, but I was so pleased with myself that I hardly noticed. Embarking on the earliest components of my plan put me one step closer to my cats. I felt as if they were half rescued already.

• • •

THE R TRAIN out of Bay Ridge was crowded that morning, but not unbearably so. Probably, I thought, a lot of people who worked in the city were off for the day. I hadn't considered it, but I realized that my own office would, perforce, have to remain closed. What felt odder than having an unexpectedly free Wednesday, however, was the idea of people who weren't taking the day off. It was impossible to imagine that in the same world that contained the smoking ruins of what had been the World Trade Center were people doing commonplace things like dressing for work, making coffee, or packing lunches for their children. Yesterday had felt disconnected and unreal. Today, it felt like something I had been born knowing would happen eventually, and it was the people going about normal, everyday things who were the ones living strange lives.

“You’re crazy,” Sharon had told me flatly when I unfolded my plan to her upon returning from the store. “Listen to the news—buildings are still collapsing down there.”

“All the more reason to go now,” I replied.

Sharon went on at some length, insisting that people weren’t being allowed back in, that there was no way I’d get through. I was welcome to stay with her at least through Friday, she told me. She was itchy to get out of town—a lot of people were—and she and her mother were planning to go away for the weekend. But her spare bedroom was mine until then.

This should have been of some concern to me because, technically, I was homeless. As far as I knew, the things I’d purchased that morning might be the only possessions I had left in the world. But that was a long-term problem, the consideration of which could only make me emotional and distract me from the immediate business at hand. In the short term, I’d already put my friend Scott on alert and he was more than willing to welcome me and my three cats if, upon reaching my apartment, I decided it was necessary to remove them. Today was only Wednesday, and by Friday I would be long gone from Sharon’s apartment.

Sharon had insisted that I take her spare keys with me anyway, in case I returned that afternoon and she was out. “Once I get to my cats, I probably won’t come back here,” I warned.

Sharon shrugged. “Then you’ll give the keys back next week at the office.”

My backpack rested on the floor of the train at my feet, next to a shopping bag that contained the items I hadn’t been able to fit into it. Everything together probably weighed about twenty pounds, but wasn’t so bad to carry when most of the weight was distributed on my back.

The R train crossed over the Manhattan Bridge on its route back into the city, surfacing so quickly from subterranean darkness into sunlight that the change was startling. It was like a rewind of the walk I’d made yesterday. A wall of smoke rose from the ground to

the south of the Brooklyn Bridge, and even on the train and at this distance, I could smell it. I turned away from the window.

The train deposited me at 14th Street. I had never thought of Manhattan as being a place with a particular, universal smell until the only smell of it—at least for me, there at the border of downtown—was the singed smell of the rubble at Ground Zero. I thought of Homer, of Homer's sensitive nose and his hyper-acute hearing. What must it smell and sound like to him, so much closer than I was to where fires still burned and buildings continued to collapse? Somehow it seemed as if Vashti and Scarlett, who could see out of the windows of our apartment, would be less frightened. At least they would be able to connect something visually to what they smelled and heard—surely, it would be less terrifying for them.

Or would it? I understood so much more than they did, and even I couldn't make sense of it all.

Stop it, I told myself. This isn't helpful.

The intersections of 14th Street were barricaded to keep vehicles from passing, but a handful of people crossed the barriers either on foot or mounted on bicycles. I had thought earlier how odd it was that the world that held the rubble of Ground Zero could also contain normal people going about normal lives. Now I realized that there were actually two worlds: the one on the northern side of the barricades, where people sipped coffee outdoors at trendy cafés, and cars and cabs propelled themselves impatiently toward shops or office buildings—and the world on the other side of the barricade, devoid of cars and navigated only by a handful of persistent pedestrians. Tightening my grip on my backpack and shopping bag, I joined them.

I walked south and east, zigzagging through the streets, the plume of smoke that had once been the World Trade Center serving as my compass. Businesses were closed and deserted, their windows papered over with the flyers and posters that had materialized overnight. *Have you seen our son?* the signs implored. *We don't know where our daughter is. She works in the World Trade Center.* Smiling

faces looked at me from the flyers, grinning beneath graduation caps or beaming from the safety of honeymoons and family fishing trips. *Do you know my husband? Have you heard from my sister? If you know anything, please call ... please call ... please call ...* It was a journey through the underworld, the shades of the dead clamoring all around me.

I made it to Canal Street before I was stopped by military personnel guarding the impromptu checkpoint I would have to pass if I was to continue. The young men in army fatigues with machine guns strapped across their chests were polite, and vaguely sympathetic, and called me “ma’am,” but they were completely unwilling to let me pass.

“This entire area’s locked down, ma’am,” they told me. “We can’t let anybody through.”

“But I live there,” I pleaded, “and my cats are—”

“Sorry, ma’am,” they said firmly. “We can’t let anybody in.”

A flatbed truck carrying men and women with cameras was waved through. “But you’re letting those people in,” I argued.

“They’re journalists, ma’am.”

Recognizing a lost cause when I saw one, I headed east across Canal Street. When I reached the next checkpoint, I tried once again.

“I’m a journalist,” I said, without hesitation.

The young men guarding this barricade looked at me with polite skepticism, their gazes taking in my jeans, backpack, and sweat-streaked face. “May we see your press credentials, ma’am?”

“Um ...” My smile faltered. “Well, you know, it’s buried in my backpack and I ...”

“Sorry, ma’am,” I was once again told. “We can’t let anybody through.”

“But—”

Their expressions were unyielding. “Please step away from the barricade, ma’am.”

I continued onward, hoping that I might find some back street, some tiny alley that, in the haste and confusion, had been overlooked and left unbarricaded—or, barring that, a sympathetic soldier. None was forthcoming. I’d had a hazy idea, when I’d pulled cash out of the ATM that morning, that I would be willing to bribe people if I had to. But when it came down to it, I was too intimidated to make the attempt. Nor did I really want to know if any of the soldiers could be bribed. It would have been unsettling to learn that the people now protecting us were subject to petty corruptions.

It’s okay, I told myself. You left the cats enough food and water to last at least through today, and by tomorrow morning you’ll be able to get back in.

I pushed the thought of broken windows firmly from my mind. I had spent the morning walking among the images of the dead, but my cats were still alive. If they weren’t, wouldn’t I have known? They were alive, and they were fine, and my plan was a good one that would reunite me with them tomorrow. They would be fine until tomorrow.

I RETURNED TO Sharon’s apartment disappointed, but not yet despondent. This was only a minor setback. I told myself that it still made sense to try to reach somebody at my building, and even if nobody was there, I’d certainly be able to get back in the next day.

“Try the ASPCA or PETA,” Andrea suggested when I called her that afternoon to check in. “I’m sure they’re coordinating rescue efforts for pets.”

I was angry at myself for not having thought of this before Andrea did. As a Miami native, hadn’t I lived through enough hurricanes to know that there were always animal rescue organizations that helped reunite owners with their pets in the wake of a disaster?

I called the ASPCA, and somebody answered on the first ring! Hope continued to mount when I explained my situation, and the woman on the other end said, “Yes. We’re working with local authorities to help reunite people with their pets. Give me your information and I’ll have someone call you back.”

“My name is Gwen Cooper,” I began, “and I—”

“Wait, you’re Gwen Cooper?” the woman interrupted. “Gwen Cooper from John Street?”

In fact, I *was* Gwen Cooper from John Street. But how could this woman know that? Unless, I thought, there had been some further catastrophe, some additional disaster that had only affected *my* building, and maybe they had a list of tenants who they’d have to break the news to and—

“Your pet-sitter—Garrett?—has been calling us all morning. He doesn’t know if you’re alive or dead, and he’s frantic. He told us to have you call him if you called us. He says that your contract with him gives him access to your apartment in the event of an emergency, and he’ll show it to the people in your building in case they won’t let him in. He has food, water, and litter, and he’s going to try to ride his bicycle in. He said, *Tell her I’m not leaving my buddy down there.*”

The potted plant resting in front of Sharon’s phone twinned and blurred. Always, always, people were willing to go above and beyond for Homer. My cats had always been a reminder to me of the capacity for human goodness in the world; each of them was alive because someone else had done a kind and charitable thing for something small and helpless—down to the burly mechanic I’d had all those years ago in Miami, or my mother who, on paper, didn’t even like cats in the first place.

“I’ll call him,” I told the woman at the ASPCA. “And thank you for giving me the message.”

I had to collect myself for a minute before I could call Garrett, my gratitude tumbling out in a confused jumble of sentences that only somebody as patient as he was could have unraveled. I wanted to

convey something of what I felt—of what it meant to realize that my cats and I had been remembered, were being thought of by someone who I hadn't thought about since the terror of the day before.

"Of course," Garrett murmured, whenever I paused for breath. "*Of course*. I know, believe me, I understand ... I'll do everything I can ... I'll call you if I manage to get in ..."

Garrett wasn't the only one who was thinking of Homer and me. When I checked the voice mail of my home machine, it was full. It seemed as if everybody who'd ever known us wanted to know if we were okay: old boyfriends from Miami, the friends I'd made since I moved to New York. "What's our plan to get your cats?" they would ask. "I have a bicycle ... I know a rescue worker ... I know somebody at the mayor's office ... I can send you money ... will money help? What can be done, what can *we* do? Homer's my buddy, my boy. We'll get him. We'll get him, Gwen, you'll see ..."

It was still only the first day, and hope was everywhere. Somebody would get to the cats. We would be fine.

THE NEXT MORNING was a retread of the morning before. Once again, I tried to get into the Financial District. Once again, I was turned away. I knew of at least three different people attempting to get to Homer, Vashti, and Scarlett on foot or on bicycle, but it seemed unlikely that anybody else would be successful where I had failed.

I calculated that the food I'd left for the cats Tuesday morning would last about a day and a half. That meant that, probably right around now, their food was running out. What concerned me more, though, was water. The air in New York was far drier than it had been in Miami, and no matter how much I filled the water bowl, it would completely evaporate within twenty-four hours. I'd heard that humans couldn't live more than two or three days without water, but I didn't know how long a cat could go.

"Well, they can always drink from the toilet if they have to, right?" Andrea said.

“No.” I was anguished. “I keep the toilet lid closed so Homer won’t fall in.” I mentally vowed that I would always leave the toilet lid open from then on.

Thursday was the first day, since September 11 itself, when I felt true panic. I was worried for the cats’ survival, but I also found the thought of what they must be going through unendurable. They had never been left alone for so long without anybody’s checking in on them—they had never gone so long without food or a change of their water. The litter box hadn’t been cleaned since Monday night and must, I was sure, be an abomination by now. They wouldn’t understand—they would think I had abandoned them to hunger and thirst, and the horrible sounds and smells coming from Ground Zero.

I don’t know what my state of mind would have been if I hadn’t gotten the call, late Thursday afternoon, from the ASPCA. The area had finally been deemed stable enough to allow residents with pets back in just long enough the following day to collect their pets. “President Bush is going to speak from Ground Zero tomorrow,” the woman from the ASPCA warned. “So you’ll need photo ID proving you live in the area.”

I still had my Miami driver’s license, which I hadn’t bothered to change since moving to New York. I didn’t drive a car anymore, and the license hadn’t yet expired, so it functioned just fine for normal ID purposes. Trading it in for a New York license had seemed more like an inconvenience than anything else. But I did have a checkbook in my purse with my name and New York address listed on it, and I hoped that the two together would provide sufficient evidence that I was who I said I was and lived where I said I lived. And going in with a group of ASPCA volunteers would undoubtedly help. Maybe I could avoid an ID check altogether.

Sharon left town on Friday morning. I handed her the spare keys and tried, in the fierceness of the hug I gave her, to convey my gratitude for these last few days. “Good luck,” she said into my shoulder. “Call me when you’ve got them.”

I phoned Scott and told him to expect the four of us—definitely, for sure—that night. My situation had all the pristine clarity of a syllogism. I would have to leave New York that night, because I had no place to stay. But I wasn't going to leave New York without my cats. Therefore, I would get my cats that day.

No matter what.

THE WOMAN WHO called from the ASPCA had directed me to an airplane-hangar-sized space at Chelsea Piers. Chelsea Piers was a huge entertainment/all-purpose complex on the West Side Highway. It featured bars, restaurants, an ice-skating rink, a bowling alley, batting cages, and several facilities large enough to host trade shows. In the last few days, it had been utilized as an overflow hospital for survivors and rescue workers injured at Ground Zero. The ice-skating rink had been appropriated as a makeshift morgue.

Before going to Chelsea Piers, I had made one last effort to reach my cats on my own. I'd made it as far as the City Hall terminus of the 6 train, mere blocks from my apartment. Upon reaching the top of the station stairs, however, I had been stopped by soldiers asking for my photo ID. I tried showing them my Florida driver's license in tandem with my checkbook, but had been unable to convince them to let me through. Reluctantly, I'd boarded the train once again and headed back uptown.

I found the ASPCA's area easily enough once I reached Chelsea Piers, and signed in with my name and address at a desk in the front of the room. They had divided Lower Manhattan into zones, and would bring in groups of people divided by their specific locations. The weather had turned gray and sharply cold that morning; all my own heavier clothes were in my apartment along with my cats. The woman who took my name and address, noticing that I shivered in my thin T-shirt, directed me to another enormous room, filled with boxes of donated clothing. I selected an over-large flannel shirt and buttoned it over my T-shirt and jeans, topping it with a sturdy

windbreaker. Nothing fit quite right, but at least it would keep me warm.

I returned to the waiting room and seated myself in a plastic chair, settling my backpack and shopping bag on the ground beside me. There were scores of other pet owners there, trading stories and rumors in grim, hushed voices. One man said he knew a guy who'd made it all the way to the front door of his building, only to find that the doormen had left and locked the main door to the building behind them. The man didn't have a key to that front door—and who did, when you lived in a doorman building? He'd made it all that way and, in the end, hadn't been able to get into his building after all.

I lived in a doorman building. With all the careful planning and foresight I'd attempted to employ, it had never occurred to me that, upon reaching my building, I might not be able to get through the front door. The anxiety already churning in my stomach increased threefold.

All of us were nervous; we didn't know if we'd make it to our homes, or what we'd find once we got there. We distracted ourselves as best we could, trading photos of our pets and sharing anecdotes of their courage or cowardice, their likes and dislikes, the quirks that made them real and individual to us. "This is Gus, and this is Sophie," one woman said, showing me a snapshot of two Border collie mixes. "Our kids are just crazy about them." Her fond smile wobbled. "They've never been alone this long. I don't know what our kids will do if they're not okay."

"Of *course* they will be," I assured her. "Of course they'll be fine."

I showed her pictures of my own brood. Like most people, she marveled at Vashti's beauty and laughed at tales of Scarlett's sulky hauteur. "Poor thing," she said pityingly when she came to Homer's photo. "Poor little thing. He must be terrified."

"He's the toughest little guy you've ever seen," I told her. "He once chased a burglar right out of my apartment." I related the story of the break-in, and noticed that my audience was growing. "Pets

can adapt to so much more than we give them credit for. This'll be nothing for him." People around me nodded, and I prayed as I said it that I was right.

The hours rolled by in pet-owner purgatory. From time to time, one of the women or men with the ASPCA would stand in the front of the room to announce that they were heading in to a specific set of blocks, and a small band of pet owners would excitedly move forward, driver's licenses held at the ready. Sometimes, they would make announcements like, "Anybody we bring to a building, who goes into their building and comes out without a pet, will be taken straight to jail." Apparently, some people were down there pretending they had pets so that the ASPCA could help them return to their apartments to retrieve laptop computers or business documents. "This is no joke, folks. We have police officers going in with us, and if you come out of your building without a pet you will go *immediately* to jail."

After two hours, I was antsy beyond endurance. I was losing confidence that they would be able to smuggle me past the checkpoints without proper ID. The crowd in the room should have been thinning out, but it didn't seem like it was. I couldn't detect a pattern in the zones they were calling—if they were moving from north to south or east to west. All I knew was that they hadn't called mine. *The next zone they call will be mine*, I kept telling myself. *The next one will be me*. Another hour passed, however, and it never was. Finally, unable to wait any longer and deciding that I might actually be better off on my own since I didn't have New York ID, I decided there was nothing for me to do but try to go in myself.

I walked east from Chelsea Piers until I reached Seventh Avenue, then turned south. My backpack was on my back, and I clutched the large shopping bag containing the items too large to fit into the backpack. After three days of handling, the bag was coming apart, and I had to hold it in both arms to keep everything in place. I kept going until Seventh Avenue intersected with Houston Street and became Varick Street. There was a barricaded checkpoint guarded by three police officers—two young men, and one who looked a bit

older. It was the first checkpoint I'd encountered that wasn't monitored by military personnel, and I took this as a positive sign.

"ID, please," the older officer said. I pulled out my Florida driver's license along with the checkbook that bore my Manhattan address. The cop put them together and regarded them doubtfully. "We're not supposed to let anybody in without ID."

"Please," I said desperately. "I just moved here—that's why I don't have a New York license yet. You can search me. You can *strip*-search me. You can truss me up like Hannibal Lecter and roll me in on a dolly. I just want to get back to my cats. Please, sir, please, *please* let me in."

The three of them looked at each other. They were cops, not soldiers—and, unlike the soldiers, they *were from* here. This was their city. I was somebody in that city who needed help. They could tell at a glance, with all the instincts of a cop, that I wasn't a threat.

Still, orders were orders.

"Please," I said again. "They haven't had food or water in days. They'll die if I can't get back to them. They'll die without me. Please, sir—I promise I won't hurt anybody. I just want to get to my cats. Please help me. All I need is someone to help me. I've been trying to get back to them for days and days. Please, sir, please help *me*—*please* let me in!"

I had been prepared, as circumstances dictated, to fake-cry as a way of gaining sympathy. There was nothing I wouldn't stoop to at this point. But now I found, to my complete humiliation, that my crying wasn't fake. I was sobbing—huge, racking, genuine sobs that took all the air from my body and doubled me over. I buried my face in the shopping bag I clutched, I dragged my sleeve across my face to clear my eyes, but the tears kept coming. My cats would die because I hadn't changed my driver's license. They would die over a driver's license. It seemed like such a stupid, impossible thing, yet here was the reality of it.

The three cops stood there, looking at me a bit uncomfortably, until I had cried myself out. Finally, one of the younger ones spoke.

There was a slight trace of a Hispanic accent in his voice as he said, “My wife is pretty crazy about our cats. She’d probably kill me if we didn’t let the girl in.”

I looked up hopefully. Was it going to happen? Had I really and finally succeeded?

“Here are pictures of my cats,” I said, scrambling around in my purse for my photos. I struggled to hold them up along with the shopping bag cradled in my arms. “That’s Scarlett, and that’s Vashti,” I pointed to each in turn, “and that’s my youngest, Homer.”

The three of them squinted and looked where I pointed. “The little one’s interesting looking, isn’t he?” said the older policeman.

“He’s blind.” I was pulling out all the stops. “Anything could have happened—if a window broke, he wouldn’t know not to jump out of it, and I live all the way up on the thirty-first floor. And he must be so terrified—he can’t see what’s going on. Can you imagine what it must sound like down there, to such a little cat who’s blind?”

The older police officer heaved a deep sigh. “All right,” he said. He stepped away slightly from the opening between two barricades and waved me through. “Go on.”

“Oh, thank you!” I clutched his hand, pressing it between both of my own. “Thank you! Thank you!” I pivoted blindly to each of the three police officers and thanked them in turn. Then I readjusted the weight of my backpack and shopping bag, wiped the last of the tears from my cheeks, and stepped past the barricades.

“*Vaya con dios,*” the younger officer said as I passed. *Go with God.*

I stuck mainly to back streets as I made my way from the West Village down to the Financial District. I was afraid that if I used the main thoroughfares, I might encounter another checkpoint, somebody else demanding ID before allowing me to continue on my way.

It was something I needn’t have worried about. I walked for more than three miles, and that entire time I didn’t see or hear another living soul—not a car, not a person, not a bird in a tree. It felt eerie,

almost post-apocalyptic, as if I were the only living human left in Manhattan. I had never seen or even heard of a completely deserted New York City street. No matter how late the hour or how quiet a neighborhood, there was always something or someone else—a woman walking a dog, a man delivering produce to a twenty-four-hour grocery store, lights in windows. You were never so far from a major thoroughfare as to be unable to hear cars whizzing by like comets in the distance.

But now there was nothing but silence. Smoke and silence.

The sky was still gray, and it seemed to grow grayer as I approached Ground Zero, the smoke intensifying until my throat stung and my eyes watered. My arms and back ached almost beyond my physical capacity to stand it. Once, I tripped over a crack in the pavement and dropped the shopping bag I carried. The sound of it hitting the ground rang out and echoed from the walls of buildings like cannon fire and I jumped, even though I knew where the sound had come from. The silence of the streets had felt unnatural until something broke it—and then the sound was even more out of place.

Ash had settled onto everything, and grew thicker the farther south I went. The green leaves of trees and bushes and the once festive awnings of boutiques and cafés were caked a uniform gray-white. Even the mannequins inside display windows were coated so thickly that they were indistinguishable from the clothes they modeled.

After an hour or so, I reached Ground Zero itself and rejoined the world of noise and other people. I could hear the groans of trucks and men, the metallic chatter of walkie-talkies and the barking of police dogs. I had seen pictures of the rubble on TV and in newspapers, but it had still been impossible to imagine how enormous the devastation was, the acres and acres of fallen, heaped-up metal and concrete. The thing was still belching smoke and occasional flames. Tiny specks of men, their faces black with soot and drenched in sweat, dotted the ruin as they looked for survivors.

I didn't look at it for very long; it felt disrespectful, somehow. And there were other places I had to be.

My anxiety grew as I turned the corner onto the block where I lived. What if, like the man I'd heard about back at the ASPCA relief center, I'd come all this way only to find that my building was locked and empty? To my utter joy and relief, however, the front door of my building was open when I reached it—and there in the lobby were Tom, my doorman, and Kevin, my building super. I'd had countless interactions with each of them, of the semi-friendly/semi-professional variety, but now I was so happy to see them, I dropped my shopping bag and threw myself into their arms. "You're here!" I cried as they each wrapped me in bear hugs. "I can't believe you're really here!"

"We never left," Kevin said. I knew Kevin had an enormous family—something like eight kids and twelve dogs and Lord-alone-knew-how-many cats—all the way up in Queens. "If we'd left, we might not have been able to get back in."

"You are so not wrong about that." I couldn't stop grinning.

"We still don't have phones, electricity, or water," Kevin said, "so I can't recommend you stay here. We're on the same power grid as the stock exchange, though, so we should be back up in a couple of days."

"And the building itself?" My voice was anxious as I asked this question. "Were any windows ...?"

Kevin's face softened. He knew all about Homer—he was the one who had supervised the installation of the childproof guards on my windows that kept them from opening wide enough for a small, blind cat to wriggle his way through. "No broken windows," he said gently. "Homer and your other cats should be fine."

"We were just doing a sweep for pets," Tom added, swinging his arm around to indicate the pet carriers of all sizes, each containing a dog or cat, scattered throughout the lobby. "People have been trickling back in to get them."

“Well, I’m here now.” I reached into the side pocket of my backpack to pull out my flashlight. I flicked it on and off once, to make sure it was working. “Just point me in the direction of the stairwell.”

“Do you need any help?” Tom regarded me with concern. “That’s a lot of stuff you’re carrying.”

“I’ll be fine,” I assured him. “You guys worry about the other pets whose people haven’t gotten back yet.”

The stairwell of my apartment building was an interior one, windowless and entirely encased in concrete. Without any electricity, even from an emergency generator, it was completely black. The sole illumination came from the pale, round pool cast by my flashlight.

I was so eager to get back to my cats that I hated myself for having to stop and rest as I climbed up thirty-one floors. My arms, thighs, and back ached beneath the weight of the things I carried, and I was drenched in sweat. By the time I reached the thirteenth floor, I was panting so hard that I had to sit and catch my breath. My gasps echoed loudly in the cement stairwell as I unscrewed the cap of the small bottle of water Tom had pressed into my hand. I sipped from it sparingly; I didn’t want to drink too deeply and end up with a cramp that would slow me down further.

After a few minutes, I continued my ascent. I had to stop again to catch my breath at the twentieth floor and at the twenty-eighth floor. My legs were starting to shake by then, but I was only three floors away—there was no point in resting any further. When the sign that said 31 swam before my eyes, I almost wept for the second time that day—this time in gratitude.

My fingers had stiffened around the shopping bag, and I fumbled with my keys as I inserted them into the lock of the door to my apartment. I had expected the smell of smoke to hit me in the face when I opened the door, and so it did, but overwhelming even that was the putrid smell of the litter box that hadn’t been cleaned since

Monday night. My heart tore. *Poor things*, I thought. *Having to live with that all week!*

I had been almost afraid to enter the apartment, unsure of what I might find. But a quick peek through the front door confirmed that everything was intact, unharmed, and exactly where I had left it Tuesday morning. The only difference was that there wasn't so much as a crumb left in the cats' food dish. The water bowl was dry as a bone.

Scarlett and Vashti were huddled together miserably on the bed, but their heads flew up as I entered. Homer was standing in front of the windows. His body was held with an alert, tense readiness, as if he'd been pacing before he'd heard the key hit the lock. His nose was in the air and his ears zipped around. *Who is that? Who's there?*

I carefully set down my bag and backpack, not wanting to frighten them further with any loud or unnecessary noise. "Kitties," I murmured hoarsely. "I'm here."

Upon hearing my voice, Homer responded with a piercing *Mew!* He covered the distance between us in two bounds and leapt at me, hurling himself at the center of my chest with a force that almost knocked me down. I sank to the floor to prevent any mishaps, and Homer burrowed his head into my chest and shoulder as hard as he could.

"Homer-Bear!" I said. At the sound of his name, Homer rubbed his whole face vigorously against my cheeks and resumed his cries of *Mew! Mew! Mew!* Beneath them I heard rich, singsong purring, the way he'd purred as a kitten when he'd realized I would be there every morning when he woke up. "I'm so sorry, little boy," I said. The tears Homer couldn't see in my eyes were audible in my voice. "I'm so sorry it took me so long."

Vashti approached almost shyly, as if she respected the intensity of Homer's joy and didn't want to intrude on it. She put her two front paws on my leg and squeaked tentatively, and I drew her into my arms as well. Only Scarlett remained aloof. She looked at me balefully through narrowed eyes, then turned her face away. *Well,*

look who finally decided to show up. But even she relented after a moment. *I guess you probably came back as soon as you could.* She, too, crawled into my lap, for once not swatting impatiently at the other two as she jockeyed for position.

“I will *never* leave you alone this long again,” I told them. “I will never, *never* let anything bad happen to you, and I will never leave you alone this long again.” I pried Homer from my chest and held him in front of me, as if I wanted to be sure he understood what I was saying, even though he couldn’t—not really.

Yet I felt sure he knew. Somehow, he always did.

“I promise,” I said. “I *promise* you.”

The next morning, from Philadelphia, I mailed Garrett a check for the equivalent of a full week of pet-sitting. I mailed another check to the ASPCA.



21 • None So Blind

I shall never all my days be as good a man as he was.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

MY FRIENDS IN MIAMI WERE UNITED IN THEIR OPINION THAT I SHOULD move back in the wake of September 11. There was no question that life in New York became as hard as I could have anticipated back before I'd moved, when I'd posed myself worst-case hypotheticals. The stench of smoke and ruin from Ground Zero lingered for months; to this day, I associate the smell of things burning with my first autumn in New York. It bothered Homer especially, and it was months before he stopped wandering around the apartment, complaining fretfully about something he couldn't quite identify but that created a constant, low-level anxiety. The clamor of dump trucks and helicopters was constant, and this made Homer jumpy as well. The high point of Homer's day had always been the early part of the evening, when I would return from work. Now he was so ecstatic every time I reentered the apartment—even if I'd gone no farther than the grocery store across the street—that it was several minutes before I could detach him from me long enough to put down my purse and hang up my coat.

I would have considered moving to a different neighborhood, but within two months of September 11 I lost my job. My company had primarily serviced the large financial firms that had been decimated near Ground Zero, and was struggling for bare survival. Good luck finding an apartment in Manhattan without a letter from an employer—even if I'd had the lump sum necessary to pay first, last, and security (plus moving expenses) at a new building.

The entire economy had tilted into recession, and it took me eight months to find another job. I was as relentless in chasing down freelance work as I'd been a few years earlier, when I was first trying to gain a foothold in the marketing industry. When I did finally find a job, it was a permanent freelance position in the online marketing department of AOL Time Warner, one where I worked full-time fifty hours a week but received no benefits or guarantee of long-term employment. I went one terrifying year without health insurance. There were days when, as my grandmother used to put it, I lived on mustard sandwiches without the mustard. Somehow or other, though, I always paid the vet bills and rent.

Curiously, it was my parents who were the most supportive of my decision to remain in New York, alive though they were to the dangers that a life in Manhattan now seemed to present. They knew how important the move had been to me, how personally and professionally dead-ended I'd come to find my life in Miami. They were proud of the fact that, no matter how rough the going got, I didn't creep back home with my tail between my legs.

If I had learned one thing from Homer over the years, it was that just because you couldn't quite see your way out of a difficulty, that didn't mean a way out didn't exist. I'd also learned the value of persistence. The two of us—Homer and I—weren't quitters. And as the months rolled by, I found another reason for refusing to leave New York if it was at all possible to remain.

New York was the city where Laurence Lerman lived.

I FIRST MET LAURENCE A MONTH BEFORE SEPTEMBER 11. HE WAS A close friend of Andrea's fiancé, Steve—Steve's "big brother" from college fraternity days and one of the groomsmen in their upcoming wedding.

That August before September 11 was probably the most comfortable I had felt in New York since I'd moved. Work was still good, I finally felt confident in my ability to navigate the streets of Manhattan on my own, and my cats seemed to have completely reconciled themselves to this major life change I had subjected us all to. Homer had formed a particularly strong attachment to the pizza deliveryman, who was at our door at least twice a month. Just that afternoon, he had presented Homer with a can of tuna when delivering my small pie with light cheese and extra sauce, which pretty much endeared him to Homer for life.

So I was in an expansive mood that night when I arrived at the party where I met Laurence—ready to add more people to my growing network of New York friends.

The occasion was the birthday party of a mutual friend, held on a tar-covered rooftop under the warm skies of Manhattan in summer. I remember perfectly the first time I saw Laurence. He was standing next to Steve, and the two of them were engaged in what appeared, from a distance, to be a lively discussion. Laurence wore a white buttondown shirt with the sleeves rolled up, blue jeans, a black belt, and black loafers. He gestured emphatically to Steve as he spoke, using his entire forearm, and leaned in intently. You might have thought the two of them were having an argument, except that Steve was laughing and the look on Laurence's face was one of twinkly-eyed humor. "You remember who Laurence is," Andrea said, and I dredged up some faint recollection of outrageously funny comments—or comments that Andrea had insisted were outrageously funny as she'd repeated them to me, laughing so hard she could barely breathe, before conceding that they probably lost something if Laurence wasn't telling the story himself.

Several of Laurence's close friends were there, two of whom were professional comedians and one of whom, within the next few years,

would go on to become quite famous. There was certainly no shortage of humor, or funny stories, or hilarious insights that evening. I can remember word for word some of the jokes and stories that other people told, but I can't remember a single word that Laurence said, not even whether he shook my hand when we were introduced or merely waved at me in a friendly fashion.

But I do remember thinking that Laurence was the funniest person there—probably the funniest person I had ever met. People came and went, small conversational circles formed and re-formed, but I didn't move an inch from Laurence's vicinity all night.

It wasn't just that Laurence was funny, though; some of the funniest people you meet are performers by nature and, entertaining as they are, you get the feeling in talking to them that you're simply an audience, that the things they're saying to you are essentially the same things they've said to countless other people, and in that sense your presence makes very little difference to the flow of their thoughts. But Laurence liked to listen at least as much as he liked to talk. He would ask you questions and make you talk about yourself, and you would begin to think, in talking to him, that you were a more entertaining person than you'd ever suspected. Laurence liked to talk fast; he was quickwitted, and the speed at which his mind and mouth worked was a thing to be marveled at. Yet he never once talked over you, never cut you off in his haste to give voice to whatever was going on in his head. You would be the sole focus of his attention when he talked to you, yet suddenly you'd look around and realize that a small crowd had gathered to listen in on your conversation. You could never exactly say that Laurence had been the center of attention of any group he was a part of. But he was always the one who had made that group interesting.

And then there was Laurence's voice, which was one of his great charms all on its own. It was a deep, rich voice with a booming resonance, as if his chest contained its own echo chamber. There was a raspy, smoky undertone to it, and when he was being funny it seemed to contain all the laughter in the world. It was a voice that could roar out at you like a lion, then suddenly drop to a

murmuring intimacy that created instant in-jokes just between you and him. Much later, Laurence would tell me about the year in his twenties when he'd lived in Sweden, where he was a DJ for Stockholm's first rock-and-roll station after the government deregulated radio. Everywhere he'd gone, even if it was just to a McDonald's for an order of fries, people would excitedly say, "You are the Laurence from the radio!" It was a telling detail in Laurence's personal history; his was a voice that, once heard, was never forgotten.

At one point, Andrea indicated Laurence's girlfriend, who sat a few yards away on the bench of a chip-and-dip-laden picnic table that had been set up on the rooftop. It was a sultry night, and I wore one of those strappy tops that bare a great deal of cleavage. I remember thinking that if I had been Laurence's girlfriend, and had observed him cracking up for hours with some cleavage-y, unattached girl nobody had ever seen before, I would have put a stop to it with a quickness.

I CAN HONESTLY say, however—at least so far as my own intentions went—that I was no threat to Laurence's girlfriend that evening. Simply learning that he had a girlfriend, and that they had been together for over four years, would have tamped out any thoughts I had in that direction. I never was interested in unavailable men. I always found the quality of being interested in me one of the most interesting qualities a man could possess—and you can call that egotistical if you want, but it was a quirk that had painlessly extricated me from more than a few deadend relationships.

I was still fairly new in New York, and it would have felt almost incestuous to immediately begin dating one of my best friend's fiancé's best friends. Who knew how such a relationship would turn out, and Andrea and Steve's wedding didn't need to be about my relationship dramas. Surely, in a city of eight million, I could find other options. And then there was the question of age difference. Laurence was nearly nine years older than I was—which, in the

general sense of things, hardly qualified as an age difference at all, but I didn't need to consult books like *The Rules* to realize that a man approaching forty who'd never been married might be someone who wasn't too keen on the institution to begin with. The only thing I found less appealing in the abstract than a man who was unavailable was a man who, while technically available, would someday have to be talked into making a lifetime commitment.

I had never thought of myself as a person who was attracted to a set physical type. Looking back, though, I realize that most of the boyfriends I had—the ones I would have called serious—more or less conformed to a particular physical template. They tended to be tall and skinny, underfed looking, with dark hair and eyes, large noses, and ears that stuck out farther than they probably should. These men were literary or artistic—or, at least, frustrated artistic or literary types—and we would have long, intricate discussions about books and politics. They were shy and a bit awkward, and were always surprised that somebody as outgoing as I was was also as interested in books and politics as they were.

Laurence was barrel-chested, with short, stocky legs that looked so strong, it was as if they had been cast in iron. Wrestler's legs, I would have called them. His eyes were blue, and sometimes, if he wore a shirt of a particular light blue shade, you'd swear that you'd never seen anything bluer. You couldn't say if his features were large or small because they were so elastic. Look through my own photo albums and what you'll see is a series of identical smiles aging as the years progress. I've seen hundreds of photos of Laurence, and I have yet to see any two in which he wears the exact same expression. I always, from the first time I met him, loved to look at his face, but for a long while the symmetry of it—the reduction of it to a simple collection of features—was too elusive for me to get a fix on. Laurence's mind and his face together moved so rapidly, I had a sense that they presented a challenge I might not be up to.

It wasn't as if I sat down and drew up this list of reasons why Laurence and I couldn't be a couple. I'm just trying to explain why Laurence, despite the strong first impression he'd made, was

immediately and almost irretrievably slotted into the category of Boys Who Are Friends But Not Boyfriends. My reasons for thus categorizing him were largely unconscious. As our friendship grew and people occasionally asked why we weren't a couple—and they did—I always felt a vague surprise. It seemed so obvious that the two of us were destined to be the best of friends.

IT WAS A friendship that was initially slow to develop. I knew, the first night we met, that he was somebody I wanted to be close friends with—talk-every-day, see-each-other-constantly kind of friends. But that wasn't something that happened right away.

For one thing, Laurence was the kind of person who'd retained just about every friend he'd made since nursery school; arguably he didn't need another one. And then, of course, there was his girlfriend. Benign as my intentions may have been, I wasn't naïve enough to think that a close and hasty friendship with a single woman he'd met five minutes ago, as it were, might not cause some friction. You don't live with three cats without learning something about respect for territory. Laurence and I met from time to time at group dinners or special occasions—engaging in the kind of energetic, laughter-filled conversations that always left me with a lingering regret that I didn't see more of him—but that was all. Andrea and Steve were married in May 2002, and as we posed for formal photographs Laurence told me I looked beautiful in my bridesmaid's dress, and that was the last I saw of him all night.

A few weeks later, Laurence and his girlfriend broke up. I was giving Homer his monthly nail trimming (which was always an ordeal, Homer being fiercely resistant—far more than my other cats—when it came to anybody touching his claws) when Laurence called with the suggestion that the two of us go to some independent film he particularly wanted to see. Laurence was passionate on the subject of film—his knowledge was encyclopedic, but he wasn't a guy who did nothing more than spit out dry statistics about who had directed or written or starred in every

movie ever made. Laurence had a keen eye for camera angles, narrative arcs, character development. He could find beauty in something as minor as the specific pattern in which a director had chosen to shoot glass falling from a broken window. And he loved it all—even the silly stuff, the ridiculous comedies or shoot-'em-up action films that self-conscious intellectuals often eschewed. I loved that Laurence was “geeky” about something; I was geeky about things, too. And I liked that he knew so much about something that I knew very little about. I learned things from him.

Laurence was a writer and editor for a well-known film industry trade publication. Part of his job was interviewing actors and directors, many of whom were living legends who had shelves filled with every award under the sun. In listening to tape recordings of these interviews, you could tell how much they loved speaking with Laurence about film. You could hear it in their frequent laughter, or constant noting of, “Wow ... that’s a good question. Nobody’s ever asked me that before.” Interviews that were scheduled to last fifteen minutes typically stretched to an hour and a half or longer.

I was overjoyed when Laurence called and asked me to see a movie with him, and I phoned Andrea to tell her of this development. It wasn’t until after the movie, when we were seated in a Moroccan restaurant in the East Village and Laurence asked about my family, that it occurred to me that perhaps he’d meant this to be a date? But he didn’t try to kiss me, or hold my hand, or make any other overtures toward physical intimacy, and I brushed the idea from my mind. I think I was able to do it so easily because I wanted to; I thought of Laurence as a potential friend, not as a potential boyfriend, and I was too eager to establish our friendship to allow it to disintegrate before it even began for that most banal of reasons—that we’d tried dating each other and found it didn’t work.

That it wouldn’t work was something I was so sure I knew, I didn’t even bother asking myself the question. Neither one of us was exactly a kid anymore, and how many successful relationships did we have between us? It was a risk I wasn’t willing to take—not with Laurence.

OUR FRIENDSHIP PROGRESSED over the next three years, and eventually came to be as close as I ever could have wished for. We talked on the phone several times a day, every day, and saw each other at least once a week—which, given how frenetic life in New York could be, was saying something. There was nobody, not even Andrea, whom I saw or spoke with as frequently as I did Laurence. When, early in 2003, I finally landed a permanent position in the marketing department of the company that published *Rolling Stone* and *Us Weekly* magazines, it was Laurence, and not Andrea, who got the first phone call.

Laurence was probably the first person to become important in my life without meeting Homer. This was not a conscious plan on my part and had more to do with the realities of life in New York. South Beach was a small town (consisting of only one square mile), and was the kind of place where friends dropped in on you at odd hours just to hang out. Manhattan was enormous, a town that encouraged efficiency and forethought plans. It was a city where you met people at the place you would be going to, rather than meeting first at somebody's home and then proceeding out. People did occasionally come by my apartment just to kill time or watch a movie, but those were friends whose apartments were smaller and less comfortable than my own. Laurence—with all the luxury of a huge living space—had the most comfortable apartment by far of anyone I knew. On those occasions when we got together to relax on a couch over a pizza or a bottle of wine, it was always at his place.

Not that it was crucial for Laurence to meet Homer—it wasn't as if I planned on *marrying* him or anything.

Besides, the two of us spent most of our time together out and about. Laurence had been born in Brooklyn, raised in New Jersey, and moved to Manhattan almost as soon as he'd graduated college. He was deeply in love with all things New York and, consequently, was the one I roped into all the touristy New York things I was dying to do. We went to Ellis Island, where I found the official record of my great-grandparents' arrival in the United States, and to the Statue of Liberty. We went to the top of the Empire State

Building and to the West Village dive bars and subterranean restaurants where, a hundred years earlier, some of our favorite writers had caroused and drunk themselves to death. At the Museum of Modern Art, I was surprised to learn the depth of Laurence's knowledge of modern art—far deeper than my own. Laurence was also a theater buff and procured tickets for everything from *Henry V* at Lincoln Center to *Sock Puppet Showgirls* downtown, which was—as its name would imply—a live-action take on the film *Showgirls* as acted by an all-sock-puppet cast. (Word to the wise: You haven't experienced the true glory of live theater until you've seen sock puppets pole dance.)

By now, you're probably saying, *Okay ... surely this paragon of male virtue had at least a few flaws. It couldn't all have been this idyllic, could it?*

Well, it is my sad and solemn duty to inform you that Laurence Lerman was a hoarder. He lived by himself in a rent-controlled, three-bedroom apartment that he'd occupied for nearly twenty years, and it was packed to the rafters with ... junk. He had stacks of newspapers, magazines, comic books, and action figures. He had the *Playbill* for every play he'd seen since moving to New York, the ticket stub from every concert he'd attended since middle school, and a matchbook from every restaurant he'd dined in over the past two decades. Once, on a lark, I weighed his matchbook collection. It weighed over seventeen pounds. "That's probably a fire hazard, you know," I told him, and it was shortly thereafter that I began referring to him as Templeton, after the pack rat in *Charlotte's Web*.

I should hasten to add that, given how much space Laurence had, the vast bulk of these things were neatly stored in closets and drawers; he wasn't one of those crazy people you read about who lives their everyday lives amid towering piles of discarded stuff. Laurence's apartment was invariably tidy, and you wouldn't have known all that stuff was there unless he made a point of showing it to you.

Still, I was a reader and apt to think in metaphors. It struck me that Laurence wasn't leaving any room in his inner life—literally or

figuratively—for the addition of another person.

Laurence also had a fearsome temper, one thing even the people who knew him best would never deny. It wasn't frequent, but it was deadly. His anger came from some deep, physical source, and he would seem to come at you like a bull. Laurence wasn't a person who you normally thought of as physically intimidating, and to my knowledge he never struck another person in his life, but I've seen people twice his size back up when Laurence was angry, instinctively fearful for their safety. His deep, booming voice, which I loved so much, became a brutal weapon when Laurence was angered. It roared at ear-shattering volume, and—if he was especially enraged—he was capable of saying very cruel things. The unfailing brilliance Laurence had in knowing exactly what questions to ask you, the questions you would be most interested in answering, let him know intuitively what things it would be most painful for you to hear—and he would say them.

I had found it easier to stand up to the burglar in my apartment than I did to stand up to Laurence when he was in a temper. I had a deep-seated dislike of loud “scenes,” and my response, on the few occasions when we were really furious with each other, was to coldly withdraw. “Clearly,” I would tell him in an even voice—a voice that was deliberately many decibels lower than his—“you are not capable of discussing this rationally right now.” Then I would leave.

I would have said that I was merely trying to have a “productive” argument, as opposed to an illogical and unfocused one. Laurence would have said, sighing in mock dismay, that I was simply no fun to fight with. What was less fun, when you felt like screaming, than somebody who wouldn't scream back?

But when we had calmed down, we were both anxiously willing to listen to what the other one had to say. It was more painful for me to be at odds with Laurence, to feel that I had somehow compromised his good opinion of me, than it was with any other person I knew.

And to his credit, Laurence never had to be told when he had gone too far, never had to be bullied into making an apology. If Laurence was sure he was right, you'd never get him to apologize simply for the sake of making you like him again—but if he knew he was wrong, his remorse was instantaneous and no false sense of pride kept him from expressing it. Yet he was never one to plead for forgiveness. Laurence was precisely aware—without, as far as I could tell, ever having to consciously weigh the matter—of the extent to which he was wrong and how much restitution he owed. Beyond that, you could take it or leave it.

I think it was that utter lack of affectation—that core inability to do or say anything, or to refrain from doing or saying anything, merely so you would like him, or forgive him, or think of him a certain way—that ultimately made Laurence who and what he was. It was the thing that made him not a guy, but a *man*. One of my favorite novelists, Anthony Trollope, once wrote: “The first requirement of [manliness] must be described by a negative: Manliness is not compatible with affectation.”

Laurence was innately incapable of doing that which was essentially wrong or unmanly. It was the quality that all his other good qualities stemmed from—how he could be funny without ever being obnoxious; how he could talk without trying to dominate a conversation, and listen without being impatient. He was never remotely envious of the success or attainments of those around him. He would share his time, money, and possessions with lavish generosity, but nobody was ever foolish enough to make the mistake of trying to take advantage of him.

I had to think about the balance of things like this all the time. I would never be as instinctively close to getting it all right as Laurence was. And as the years of our friendship passed, it was what I came to respect and admire most about him.

I had never known anybody quite like him.

OBVIOUSLY, I WAS in love with him. Just as obviously, I was the last one to know it. By the time we were close friends of some three years' standing, it seemed as if somebody asked me every day why the two of us weren't a couple. I always demurred when this question was asked, although not from coyness or any attempt to deny the obvious. My experience with falling in love was that you met someone, were attracted to him right away, and then, as you got to know him, figured out if that attraction was substantive or merely the delusion of a few weeks. I had never experienced love the other way around—where first you got to know somebody and then realized your interest was deeper than friendship. Having never experienced it, I didn't recognize the thing when it happened to me.

Truly, there are none so blind as those who will not see.

Then one late-summer Sunday afternoon, as Laurence and I shared hot dogs and piña coladas at a beachy, outdoor grill at Chelsea Piers, he told me that he was dating someone, and my world fell apart.

It wasn't as if Laurence and I had passed the three years we'd spent not-dating each other also not-dating anybody else. Various boyfriends and near misses had come and gone, and I had shared with Laurence the details of all of them. Now that I thought about it, though, I realized Laurence had never discussed with me the women he'd been involved with. It wasn't that I'd assumed he'd remained celibate all this time. Truth be told, I hadn't thought about it much at all. I had taken it for granted that a man like Laurence would have a hard time finding a woman who could capture his serious interest, but that when that woman came along, he would tell me about it.

Well, now she had. And he did.

My first thought was that Laurence's and my days as friends were numbered. It was hard to imagine that any girlfriend would tolerate his close friendship with the likes of me. Then I immediately hated myself for thinking of me, rather than being happy for my friend's happiness. But as soon as the word *happiness* crossed my mind in

relation to Laurence and some woman who wasn't me, my head shut down and my body went numb. I felt as if I were in shock, like somebody who'd walked away from a car accident.

I tried to conceal all this from Laurence, to act as if everything were normal, but I don't think I did a very good job because he kissed me on the cheek more gently than usual as he put me into a cab bound for home.

The insomnia set in that night, and it went on for weeks. Poor Homer, who slept when I slept and—so it would seem—didn't sleep if I didn't, got very little rest himself. I took to pacing the floors, and Homer dutifully followed me step-by-step in slow circles around our one-room apartment. I felt bad for depriving him of a full night's rest, but I had a lot to think about, and there was no point in wasting eight perfectly good hours sleeping.

I tried to reason myself out of my funk, to convince myself that I only thought I wanted Laurence now because he wanted somebody else. I was the worst kind of cliché and, more than that, I was selfish. I was spoiled and selfish and used to having all of Laurence's attention to myself, and it was clearly the attention—and not the man—that I was suddenly so covetous of.

But then, as the sleepless nights rolled by, I understood—in a way that was so clear, it was shocking I'd never seen it before—that I had compared every man I'd dated over the past three years with Laurence, and they'd all come up short. They were never as funny as Laurence, never as smart as Laurence, never as manly or strong of character as Laurence was.

Anybody with two eyes in her head would have seen, long before this, that the essential complaint I'd had about all these men was that ... they weren't Laurence. I thought I'd been evaluating them on their own merits, but really all I'd done was reject them for committing the unpardonable sin of not being the one man I was already in love with.

Perhaps it had taken me so long to recognize that I loved him because he didn't look the way I'd always thought the man I would

end up with would look—he had none of the skinny, bookish appearance of the men I customarily dated. Then I thought about Homer. Homer lived in a world where vision didn't exist, where the way things and people looked wasn't only an irrelevant consideration, it was no consideration at all.

I could wrap things up with a nice neat bow right now if I said that I learned from Homer that love is blind, that it doesn't always grow in a straight line from the way somebody looks.

But that wasn't true—looks *did* matter. No matter how much of a life I'd been able to give Homer, no matter how much happiness he'd been able to carve out for himself, the one thing I could never give him was the specific joys that vision could bring. It was the easiest thing to take for granted, how looking upon a well-loved face could lift your spirits in a way that nothing else could.

So it wasn't that I realized looks were irrelevant—it was that I realized that nothing in life made me as happy as seeing Laurence's face. Sometimes, if I was meeting Laurence somewhere, I would pick him out from a crowd while he was still yards away. When I saw his face, even at a great distance, I would laugh—not because he looked funny or was doing anything particularly humorous, but because seeing his face made me so happy that some of my happiness had to spill out in the form of laughter, or else it would make me too giddy to stand.

I had been given a gift. There was something I could see with my eyes that filled me with joy every time I saw it. Not everybody was as lucky as I was.

Still, I had no more reason for supposing now than I'd had when I met him that Laurence would ever be interested in fully committing to someone. I had even less reason for thinking that "someone" might be me. Now there was this other woman—Jeannie or Jeanette, or whatever Laurence had said her name was. For all I knew, Laurence, like me, had never thought of the two of us as anything more than friends. Or maybe he'd thought about it, I was

pretty sure he'd thought about it, but that had been three years ago. How could I know what he thought about me now?

What scared me the most was the prospect of losing our friendship. I didn't know what I would do if I tried to be Laurence's girlfriend and wound up losing him altogether. And yet, I'd barely been able to speak with him since he'd told me about the woman he was dating. I might be terrified of moving forward, but moving backward was impossible and even standing still was rapidly becoming an unrealistic option.

That was something else I'd learned from Homer—sometimes, to get the things that were good in life, you had to make a blind leap.

It was Homer, I realized, who had brought me most of the insights I'd acquired about relationships over the past few years. It was Homer who had taught me that the love of one person who believed in you—and who you believed in—could inspire you to attempt even the most improbable things. Somewhere along the way, I had decided that because Laurence and I had yet to find a lasting love with another person, we were somehow fated to be unable to do so—at least not with each other. But where was that carved in stone? If anything, Homer was living proof that dark predictions about potential happiness were nothing more than an opportunity to prove all conventional wisdom wrong. Wasn't Homer someone who was supposed to have been timid and fearful, someone who might go on to live a life but who would never have an exceptional one? Yet who had I ever seen find as much to celebrate in the midst of the everyday than Homer?

Actually, I had found one person like that—and that person was Laurence. Like Homer, Laurence had that within him which was incorruptible, and which could find something to rejoice in among even the most grindingly mundane aspects of day-to-day life. Not only was it a quality I respected, it was something I aspired to. Perhaps that was why Laurence and Homer had become the most important fixtures in my life.

I had nothing but logical reasons why Laurence and I shouldn't try to be a couple, just like I'd had nothing but logical reasons why I couldn't possibly adopt a blind kitten—which only went to show that, sometimes, the thing you were looking for could only be found in the very last place you would have expected. It was Homer who had, from the first time I saw him, begun to change the ways I evaluated my relationships. When I'd met him, and recognized his innate courage and capacity for happiness, I'd understood that when you see something so fundamentally worthwhile in somebody else, you don't look for all the reasons that might keep it out of your life. You commit to being strong enough to build your life around it, no matter what.

In doing so, you begin to become the thing you admire.

Above all things, Homer had taught me that there was great joy to be found in great risks. I had been dating since I was fifteen years old, and in that entire time I had never once made anything like a declaration of love unless and until someone else made it first. The potential reward had never seemed to be worth the risk. Laurence had begun dating somebody else, and I had less reason now for thinking that risk might lead to an eventual reward than I ever had. I think, though, that I was almost more afraid of success than failure. The prospect of picking up the phone and making a single call that would, if it went the way I hoped, change the entire course of my life was terrifying. But if you were never willing to be fearless, you would never achieve anything worth having.

Homer had shown me that, too.

So, one Sunday morning in early October, I closed my eyes and leapt. That is to say, I called Laurence to tell him how I felt.

"Listen," I said, "I have to tell you something, and it's okay if you don't feel the same way, but ..." I paused, finding it difficult to know how to continue. Suddenly, I was too far in to back out, but I still had no idea where I'd land. "I think ... I think I have feelings for you that are more than friendship. And I understand," I rushed on, "if you don't—"

“Yes,” Laurence interrupted. “I do. I always have.”

We talked for a long time—more laughing than talking, and saying very little that was coherent. It was a conversation that, now that we were having it, seemed inevitable. Yet it was equally hard to believe it was really happening.

“You know,” I said, “it could be really awkward if things don’t work out for us. Because of Andrea and Steve, I mean.”

“I’ve thought about that,” Laurence replied gravely. “There’s only one solution.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“We’ll have to be madly in love with each other for the rest of our lives.”

Laurence and I hung up an hour or so later, having made a plan to see each other the following night right after work. I made a mental note to carefully review my wardrobe options. And I would have to call Andrea. Andrea had to know about this new and startling turn of events (although probably not so startling from her perspective) as soon as possible.

But all of a sudden, I found that I was too exhausted to think about any of that. Homer and I got into bed, and the two of us slept straight through until Monday morning.



22 • A Canticle for Vashowitz

May heaven grant you in all things your heart's desire—
husband, house, and a happy peaceful home; for there is
nothing better in this world than that man and wife should be
of one mind.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN MY OPINION THAT WHEN A COUPLE DECIDE TO move in together, they should find a new apartment rather than having one person move into the other's home. I had developed this theory years earlier, around the time when I'd moved into—and subsequently moved out of—Jorge's house. Humans, in my experience, can be as territorial as cats, and it's best to head off any *but I've always used this closet to store [fill in the blank]* arguments before they crop up.

It was a fine principle, as such things go, but it failed to take into account that first commandment of Manhattan real estate: Thou shalt not relinquish a rent-controlled, three-bedroom/two-bathroom apartment with a balcony. Laurence paid less in rent than I did for my studio, and had more than twice the space. When we decided to move in together, it was never a question that my cats and I would move into his home.

Still, Laurence and I were a couple for a full year before I moved in. Shortly after my *I'm in love with Laurence Lerman* epiphany, I had

begun writing a novel about South Beach. I couldn't tell you why I had woken up one morning so completely convinced that what I truly wanted in life was to be a writer (although the four layoffs I'd endured in a two-year period had persuaded me of the glories of self-employment). Nor could I tell you why I persisted when everybody I knew in publishing told me that the only thing less likely than an unpublished writer's landing a book deal was an unpublished writer's landing a book deal for a novel.

But I'd learned from Homer long ago that the difference between "unlikely" and "impossible" was all the difference in the world. After many months and I don't know how many rejection letters (I stopped counting when I reached twenty), I found an agent and the whole thing became an honest-to-God professional endeavor. Since I continued to work full-time, it took me just over a year to finish a first draft of the manuscript, and during that time—wherein Laurence patiently read, critiqued, and then reread every word I wrote—we agreed that it made sense for me to finish writing before I moved.

It would be misleading, however, if I were to suggest that my South Beach novel was the only thing keeping Laurence and me from cohabitated bliss. The truth was, Laurence was not thrilled at the prospect of living with three cats.

Laurence and I had innumerable quibbles during the first year we dated, but only one knock-down, drag-out fight—and that was over the cats. "Do there have to be *three* of them?" he asked one day, about six months into our new relationship—and he couldn't have precisely worded a question more likely to turn me cold and unyielding as a lake that had frozen over. "I don't know if I can live with three cats."

"Well, there *are* three cats," I replied. "There have always been three cats, and there will always be three cats. If you're having any *Sophie's Choice* delusions, I suggest you forget them."

It was and remains the only moment when I was halfway convinced that Laurence and I, as a couple, were a failed

experiment. It wasn't learning that Laurence didn't like cats—I'd always known Laurence didn't like cats (although, Laurence indignantly insisted, it wasn't that he "didn't like" cats; it was just that he did like dogs). But I felt that nobody could truly love me—could profess to care about my happiness—and even consider subjecting me to the wholly unbearable pain of ... what, exactly? Deciding which of my cats I loved least and sending him or her to live with strangers? Or to a shelter? While I could understand someone's not wanting to live with three cats, it struck me as the kind of thing that—having known me well for *three full years* before we were a couple—Laurence should have thought about far earlier than this. Had I walked into Laurence's apartment and found him in bed with another woman, I couldn't have been more convinced that I had been completely—*completely*—miles wide of the mark in my assessment of his character.

Deep down, ever since the day I'd first considered adopting Homer, I'd been waiting for the moment when a promising relationship would fall through because the man in question was unwilling to live with three cats. I'd always known it would happen, and the only surprising thing was that it had taken so long.

Laurence and I fought for hours, until finally we arrived at the crux of what he really meant. "You always stay at my place," he said. "You've never once let me into your apartment. Maybe there's something so horrible about living with three cats, you don't want me to see it. Or maybe you're not ready to let me into your life."

Well, he had me there. It was true that I'd never invited Laurence into my home. Before we were dating, there had been no imperative reason to do so. Now that we were a couple, I was too anxious about our relationship to make any mistakes—and I was terrified that if the four of them met and didn't like each other, I might lose Laurence. But my clever plan of avoiding this scenario by keeping everybody separated had obviously backfired. I could understand why Laurence found it difficult to believe I was serious about spending the rest of my life with him, when I wouldn't even let him spend the night with me in my own home.

So we arranged for an overnight visit, and it couldn't have gone worse. Scarlett had sprained her leg that morning due to an overly enthusiastic leap, and limped away from the newcomer in an even surlier fashion than usual. *He'll think I'm running a halfway house for blind and lame cats*, I thought. Vashti peed in Laurence's overnight bag. Homer had gotten used to a life without doors—the only door in my apartment was to the bathroom, and I always kept that open. When Laurence went in to use the bathroom, closing the door behind him, Homer sat at the door and wailed, crouching down to slide one leg, all the way up to his shoulder, into the crack between the door and the floor. The visual of Homer's disembodied leg and outstretched claw reaching for him beneath the bathroom door was, as Laurence reported, “terrifying.”

“Are you guys *trying* to make my life harder?” I asked them in despair after Laurence had left the next morning. “Couldn't you pull it together for *one night*?” Their only response was to descend upon me in a happy, purring heap. *Thank God that guy's gone.*

Still, I think it worked out for the best—insofar as Laurence was now convinced that I *must* love these pain-in-the-neck creatures beyond all reason if I was willing to put up with them. His philosophy after that night was that he loved me, and I loved the cats, so therefore ... well, he probably couldn't *love* them, but he would try to tolerate them.

LAURENCE HADN'T LIVED with a pet of any kind since he'd graduated high school (his parents had had a dog). He had, however, occasionally taken care of Minou, his landlord's cat, while his landlord was out of town. Minou was closing in on twenty years of age and, as Laurence's landlord proudly insisted, had lived so long because he was too mean to die.

Minou was not a social cat. Sometimes, when staying with Laurence, he would jump onto the computer keyboard while Laurence was writing (I felt that my own novel was coauthored by Homer, so frequently was he perched on my left knee as I wrote it),

but other than that Minou kept mostly to himself. Laurence would say that at times he forgot there was a cat in the apartment.

The chief difficulty in living with three cats, as Laurence was at frequent pains to explain to me once the four of us had moved in, was that there was always a cat *there*. I had come to take my cats' omnipresence for granted—nor would I have wanted it any other way; why have pets if they weren't around? It's true, though, that despite how large Laurence's apartment was—larger than any home the four of us had lived in together for quite some time—there was never a moment when Laurence and I were alone. At least one cat was always somewhere close by.

Nobody had an easy time adjusting at first, although Scarlett took the most straightforward approach. Scarlett had an idea that there were two types of living beings in the world. There was Mommy—who dispensed food, love, and occasional discipline—and then there were other cats. As far as Scarlett was concerned, she was the eldest cat in the household and her authority over the other cats was absolute. Laurence might be a bigger cat than most, but he was still just a cat, and since—Scarlett could only assume—it was he who had moved into *our* home, it fell upon her to clarify Laurence's limits regarding everything from where he was permitted to sit, to how close to her he was permitted to walk. That he was not permitted to touch her, or approach her directly, went without saying.

Now Scarlett's favorite method of enforcing discipline in the ranks had always been an angry swipe of her claw. If Laurence was walking down the hallway and got too close to her, she swiped at him with her claw. If she was lying in the hallway and Laurence attempted to step over her, she swiped at him with her claw. If she was sitting on the ledge of the couch behind my head and Laurence sat down next to me, inadvertently brushing against her, she swiped at him with her claw.

It would have been galling enough to Laurence that he was suddenly made to feel like an intruder in the home he'd occupied for two decades. But being slashed at by an aggressive pet is also

viscerally upsetting. And it was downright scary to stumble down a pitch-black hallway in the middle of the night and feel invisible “talons,” as Laurence insisted on calling them, rake the skin of your leg. Knowing how much bigger you are than the pet means nothing when you also know—as Laurence did—that you’re unwilling to risk inflicting injury. What was he going to do, I’m sure he asked himself more than once, fight her?

I did my best to intercede, but cats are notoriously hard to discipline and Scarlett was no different. It wasn’t as if spanking her with a rolled-up newspaper would have any effect, the way it might with a dog. Such a course of action would only have made Scarlett more hostile and aggressive—even if I’d been willing to try it, which I wasn’t.

Laurence, having grown up with a dog who *was* spanked when she was “bad,” took this to mean that I wasn’t trying to remedy the situation at all. This wasn’t true, though. I spent a lot of time thinking about how to make life with Scarlett bearable for Laurence—and if it took longer than I would have liked to arrive at a solution, it was only because I’d never been in this particular situation. I’d lived with Melissa and then with my parents during Scarlett’s pre-cuddling days, when she was content to hide if I wasn’t in the house by myself. Now Scarlett wanted to be with me all the time; she just wished everybody else would clear out and leave her alone while she did so.

The only place where Laurence could be sure of respite from Scarlett and her claws was in our bedroom; Laurence had insisted the bedroom remain “a cat-free zone.” He said he didn’t want cat fur on the bed, and I’m sure this was true (I, for one, had always been grateful that only Homer slept under the covers, meaning fur accumulated on top of the blankets but nowhere else), but I’m also sure that he didn’t relish the idea of fighting with three cats to claim a spot next to me at night. It was a fair compromise, yet the sudden banishment of the cats from my bed, each of whom had slept in bed with me for at least part of every night of their entire lives, caused more separation anxieties on all sides than I could have foreseen.

Scarlett resented her exclusion, and made her resentment known. She would sit at the bedroom door and meow loudly as soon as I went in at night and, when it wasn't opened promptly, she would slip one paw beneath the door and rattle it almost angrily. *Open this door! Open it NOW!* I think the idea of a room with no other cats—where she could have me all to herself—was Scarlett's idea of Nirvana. Here was an opportunity to relive the glorious days of her youth, when she'd been an only child, if only someone would hurry up and let her in! No matter how much I tried to shoo her away, or how often Laurence roared, "Enough already!" Scarlett refused to be deterred or consoled. Her incessant meows at the bedroom door were driving Laurence even crazier than her constant swipes at him.

The solution I finally devised solved both problems at once. Laurence usually stayed up several hours later than I did, and he began to feed the cats a small can of food late at night after I went to bed. In the first place, the food distracted Scarlett from crying at the bedroom door. By the time she finished eating she seemed to have forgotten that I had left her, and she would curl up on the living room rug or in one of the closets she liked, contentedly purring herself to sleep.

And once Laurence began feeding the cats, Scarlett seemed to understand that he was definitively *not* another cat, and was to be considered in the same general category that I was. In her own way, she came to respect him. I can't quite say that they bonded, but her philosophy seemed to be, *I don't like you, and you don't like me, but I will accept your food and leave you alone.* She seemed to think Laurence should be grateful that she'd conceded this much and, as any cat owner will tell you, he really ought to have been.

Homer was, of course, as different from Scarlett as a cat could be, and had always been willing to make a friend of any new person. But for the first time in recorded history he was afraid of someone—and that someone was Laurence.

I think, in part, this was due to Laurence's loud, powerful baritone. One of the things I loved most about Laurence was his voice, but it must have sounded like the booming voice of God to

Homer, whose hearing was so much more sensitive than any of the rest of ours.

Laurence was also the first person to have spent significant time with Homer without going out of his way to make friends. Everybody wanted to be friends with the “poor little” blind cat. Laurence was the only person I’d ever brought into my life who was willing to accept the cats on whatever terms they offered, but who refused to offer any terms himself. By this I mean, for example, that Laurence didn’t crouch down on all fours to get to know Homer on his own level, didn’t try to create games the two of them could play together or request the formal “introduction” that Homer required before he felt comfortable letting a new person pet him. Laurence didn’t care whether he petted Homer or not. If Homer had wanted to be petted, Laurence would have been happy to do so, but if Homer wanted to be left alone, that was fine with Laurence, too.

This was actually a quality I appreciated in Laurence. He felt no need to prove to himself, or to me, or to anybody else, that he was a good person because he’d forged a “special” bond with my “special” cat. Laurence didn’t even really think of Homer as being blind; once he saw the ease and energy with which Homer got around, he accepted it as a given that Homer was essentially the same as any other cat. Laurence, in fact, was the first and only person who ever did the one thing I always claimed I wanted everybody to do—he treated Homer, automatically, as if he were normal.

Homer, however, was at a loss to account for the behavior of a person who didn’t go out of his way to befriend him. Homer thought people existed for the sole purpose of playing with him, and must have felt that a person who didn’t do so could only regard him with hostility. Consequently, those first few months, he fled in terror whenever Laurence approached. It cut me to the heart to see Homer—brave, irrepressible Homer—finally fearful of something after all these years.

Perhaps the only time Homer wasn’t afraid of Laurence was when Laurence was in the kitchen. Laurence and Homer shared a similar passion for sliced deli turkey, and whenever Homer heard Laurence

open the refrigerator to pull out sandwich fixings, he'd race over from wherever he was in the apartment—his fear of Laurence momentarily dispelled. He would sink his claws into Laurence's pant leg and climb it like a rope ladder up to the kitchen counter, where he would burrow his entire head into the waxed paper containing the turkey, trying desperately to snag himself a morsel.

Laurence was afraid to pry Homer off his leg, and equally afraid to lift Homer from the counter or push him off, which meant that Homer frequently ended up with more turkey than Laurence did. It got to the point that when Laurence wanted to make a sandwich, he would first run the faucet in the kitchen sink at full blast, using the sound to conceal the opening of the refrigerator, then sneak turkey and bread into his bathroom, close the bathroom door, and run the sink in there. It was an elaborate, and successful, way of keeping Homer out of the turkey, but it was hardly an enjoyable way to prepare a sandwich.

"This is no way to live," Laurence said once.

No, it wasn't. But Laurence was a grown man, and Homer knew the word *no*, and I saw no logical reason for all these shenanigans. "Homer is perfectly aware of what the word *no* means," I told Laurence, "and you need to get used to saying it." Then I added, "It's just as frustrating for Homer as it is for you. He doesn't understand why you're not saying *no*, but also not giving him any turkey."

It wasn't that I didn't know Homer was wrong. Of course Homer was wrong, and my not-to-be-argued-with "*No! No, Homer!*" brought him to heel on numerous occasions. But I couldn't be there all the time. Laurence and the cats, to a certain extent, would have to work things out on their own.

Nevertheless, there were days when I felt so guilty about the whole thing that I didn't know what to do. Nobody was happy—not the cats, not Laurence, and certainly not me, the cause of everybody's unhappiness. "You and Laurence love each other," Andrea would say when I called for advice. "Yeah, it sucks that it's

hard for him and the cats right now, but what are you going to do? They all just need a minute to get used to each other. Laurence would still rather live with you than without you.”

Maybe. Some days, I wasn’t so sure.

Alas, turkey was merely the tip of the adjustment iceberg. Homer was as “talkative” as ever—still far and away the most verbal of my cats—and, whenever he was awake, he was engaged in a running conversation with me. He still had his *Let’s play!* meows, his *It sure has been a long time since I had any tuna* meows, his *Why aren’t you paying attention to me?* meows. “What is with that cat?” Laurence would ask in exasperation, having rewound for the third time whatever movie he was watching because he’d missed several minutes of dialogue.

Homer’s silences, on the other hand, were nearly as troublesome. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, Laurence would get up to use the bathroom, stumbling with his eyes half closed down a hallway he could have navigated blindfolded, so familiar was it. Yet now, I was almost always sure to hear the hard thud of Laurence’s shoulder hitting a wall, followed by a loud exclamation of “*Dammit!*” and the startled *clip-clip-clip* of Homer’s paws scuttling down the hallway. Homer liked to sleep in the hall, and it never occurred to him to alert Laurence to his presence by meowing. But Homer was invisible in the dark, and Laurence constantly tripped over him late at night. This disturbed Homer to no end. Homer didn’t know the difference between a hallway flooded with daylight and a hallway shadowed late at night. He only knew that sometimes Laurence tripped over him and sometimes he didn’t, for reasons that were mysterious and impossible to predict. Laurence’s “kicks” (of course he never meant to kick Homer) and yelling could only confirm what Homer already suspected—that Laurence didn’t like him. Laurence was convinced that Homer slept in the hallway, where he must have known Laurence was sure to trip over him, out of pure stubbornness. I bought a few night-lights for the hallway, which seemed to help, but the truce I effected in this way was wary at best.

Despite his shyness in Laurence's presence, however, Homer was as mischievous as he'd ever been, and Laurence's home provided him with endless adventure. Homer loved nothing more than creating chaos from order, and there was so much more for him to climb and explore here than there'd been in the studio apartment we'd lived in for so long. Laurence and I found it impossible to keep Homer from scaling bookcases or the entertainment center, throwing mounds of books and DVDs onto the floor from their original homes on neatly arranged shelves. He was especially merciless when it came to Laurence's closets, whose boxes of newspapers, photographs, posters, matchboxes, letters from friends overseas, and the carefully preserved effluvia of forty years drew Homer like a siren song. Laurence had discarded a great deal of his ... junk ... to make room for me when I moved in. Still, a mind-boggling quantity of it remained. There was so much stuff to play with here! How had Homer ever lived a happy and complete life without having this much stuff!

He would wait until nobody was around, then use a single paw to slide open a closet door so he could pillage the boxes ruthlessly, pulling out all manner of papers and objects to chew up, bat around, or claw to shreds as his fancy dictated. I can't tell you how many times Laurence and I would come home from having been out to find a ransacked apartment that looked like a crime scene—a cyclone of old college term papers and passed notes from high school days strewn across the living room floor, in the middle of which Homer crouched, turning an innocent face to our own accusatory ones as if to say, *Hi, guys! Look what I found!*

I bought some twine that we used to tie Laurence's closet doors closed (I didn't really mind if Homer got into my own closets). We created complicated knots, which were ultimately effective in keeping Homer out. But if Laurence, say, wanted to quickly grab a magazine he'd written an article for back in 1992, he would fumble impatiently with the knots and press his lips together in a restrained silence that spoke volumes.

For all the new things he found to get into, Homer was, as he had ever been, a creature of habit. He still wanted to sit with me or on me at all times, and still insisted on sitting exclusively on my left side. If Laurence happened to sit to my left on the couch, Homer would wander around the apartment at loose ends, “complaining” at the top of his lungs. Like a blind person—who knows the difference between a can of peas and a can of soup because peas and soup are always kept in exactly the same spot—Homer’s life, curious and adventurous though he was, was manageable because certain things always happened in the exact same way. Homer knew where he was supposed to be and what he was supposed to do based on where I was and what I was doing. If I was sitting on the couch, then Homer was supposed to be sitting to my left, and if he couldn’t sit to my left then something was worrisomely out of sync in the world. But Laurence couldn’t understand why I would insist that we get up and switch positions, leaving my left side free. Surely, in a three-bedroom apartment, there was room for everybody to sit wherever the hell they wanted without anybody’s having to jump up and change spots because, seriously, what was that cat’s problem?

And as if all that weren’t enough, Scarlett was not alone in her nocturnal caterwaulings at the bedroom door. Homer had no more intention of being displaced from my bed by Laurence than Scarlett did, and Homer was more insistent than she was in demanding his rights. Homer also cried at the bedroom door at night but, unlike Scarlett, cried whenever I went into the bedroom—whether it was for an afternoon nap or a change of clothes or half an hour of undisturbed seclusion while I read a novel. As soon as I opened my eyes in the morning, I would hear the *clip-clip-clip* of Homer’s footsteps down the hall, and he was crying at the door within seconds.

What was remarkable about this was that I didn’t get up at the same time every morning, nor did I use an alarm clock (people as neurotic about punctuality as I am tend to awaken on time without the aid of an alarm). I might first wake up at five or six thirty ^{AM} on a weekday, or at nine ^{AM} on a weekend, or even later, but it was

never Homer who woke me up. It wasn't until I was aware of being awake for a minute or two that I would hear Homer's footsteps approaching the bedroom—and I couldn't tell you how it was that he knew. Perhaps the sound of my breathing changed? It seemed unlikely that even Homer, acute as his hearing was, could hear a change in my breathing when he was sound asleep down the hall. But there was no disputing the fact that he knew. Within only a few days, my habit of waking up briefly and then drifting back off for another hour was a thing of the past. It was one thing for Homer to cry piteously at the door at night while Laurence was still awake, and quite another for Laurence to be awakened at five AM by a wailing cat. So I'd grab a pillow and one of the extra blankets from the closet and head for the couch where Homer would cuddle with me—ecstatic with happiness—as I dozed until I was ready to start my day.

When I had first adopted Homer, I'd toyed briefly with the idea of naming him Oedipus and calling him "Eddie" for short. Homer the poet had been blind, but Oedipus the tragic hero had lost his eyes altogether. Melissa, however, had insisted that calling an eyeless kitten Oedipus was mean (this from the person who'd thought calling him "Socket" was a swell idea), and so the idea was discarded.

Nevertheless, I now found myself with a reverse Oedipus on my hands—he'd had his mother all to himself, and now out of nowhere was this father figure who was trying to take his mother away from him. I began to despair of ever bridging the gap between the two of them.

Amazingly, it was Vashti—Vashti who was never aggressive except when she was passive-aggressive, Vashti who never used her claws or raised her voice, Vashti who always gave in and never insisted on getting her own way—who saved the day and solved all my problems. She did so by the simplest means imaginable.

She took one look at Laurence and fell deeply, hopelessly, irretrievably in love.

VASHTI HAD ALWAYS been more partial to men than to women (with the exception of me, of course). She loved to be petted and crooned to and told how pretty she was, and she liked these things especially when it was a man who was dispensing the attention. But all the men who had come into our life had had eyes only for Homer, and Vashti wasn't one to push herself on anybody.

Now there was a man who, as Vashti shrewdly surmised, didn't seem interested in Homer at all. It was true that he didn't seem interested in any of the cats, but perhaps there was an opportunity here.

She didn't leap upon Laurence all at once. But if she found a moment when the other two cats weren't around—and, miraculously, now that we lived in such a large home, sometimes Vashti had us to herself—she would jump into my lap and insist, softly and sweetly, upon being petted. She didn't try to get Laurence to pet her, but as I stroked her she would look at him with a kind of melting adoration in her eyes. It was exactly the sort of gaze that, I often thought, men must daydream about someday seeing in the eyes of a beautiful woman. *See how much nicer I can be than those two?* Vashti seemed to say. *I like you sooooo much more than they ever will.*

Vashti intrigued Laurence as well. Sometimes I caught him looking at her with an expression almost identical to her own. "She's really beautiful, isn't she?" Laurence would say. "She has a perfect little face. I don't think I've ever seen such a beautiful cat."

I don't know the specifics of how things progressed from there, or who made the first move, but one evening I came home to find Vashti nestled in Laurence's lap. He caressed her and said, "You're a pretty girl, aren't you? Aren't you a pretty, pretty girl?" He stopped his crooning as soon as he saw me, but Vashti remained in his lap for nearly an hour. Another time, I came out of the shower to find Laurence seated at the breakfast table with Vashti at his feet while he sneaked her bits of food. "Laurence!" I said. "Do you have any idea how long it took me to train them not to beg at the table?"

Laurence looked shamefaced. “But she’s so pretty, and she likes me.”

Ah, well—Laurence wouldn’t be the first man undone by such a pretext as that.

As the months went by and Laurence became more attentive, Vashti seemed to blossom into a second kittenhood. She was full of playful high spirits in a way that she hadn’t been in many a year. She would charge around the apartment—never roughly, because Vashti was quite the lady—batting furiously at anything that dangled or bringing scraps of paper over to Laurence for him to throw for her. She hadn’t done that with me since she was only a few months old. She became conspicuously more fastidious in her grooming habits, unable to tolerate the teensiest speck of dirt in her long white coat. And she would squeak with outraged jealousy if she caught Laurence and me being affectionate with each other, running over to paw gently at his leg as if to say, *Hey! Did you forget that I was here?* Laurence got a huge kick out of this; he would often make an elaborate show of hugging and kissing me while Vashti was watching, in the hope that he could provoke a demonstration of her outrage.

“I can’t tell you how much I love it when you use me to make the cat jealous,” I would say.

Scarlett and Homer still clearly preferred the days when they’d lived with me alone, but Vashti had never been happier. I was so thrilled for her happiness, I think it made me love Laurence a little more.

“They really all have their own personalities, don’t they?” Laurence observed once. “I knew that dogs had different personalities, but I never attributed different personalities to cats. I think that’s why I never really liked them until now.”

I was the tiniest bit flabbergasted. It seemed incredible to me that anybody could be unaware that, *of course*, different cats would have different personalities. Like Laurence, I had grown up with dogs, but

I'd always expected, when I brought each of my cats home, that none of them would be like any of the others.

But if this was the epiphany that got Laurence and the cats to warm up to each other, I was all for it.

It wasn't long before Laurence came not only to recognize the differences among the cats, but even to form a grudging respect for them. "I can understand Scarlett," he said one day. "Scarlett just wants to be left alone to do her own thing, and I get that." As a man who had lived alone by choice for the better part of twenty years, of course he would.

And the first time he saw Homer catch a fly five feet in midair, he was beside himself with admiration. "Look at that cat go!" he exclaimed—and he was so impressed, he hurried into the kitchen for a bit of turkey to reward Homer with. "That's a cat who knows how to *move*. Have you ever noticed that about him, how his walk is so much sleeker and more graceful than other cats'?"

Had I *noticed*? Was he kidding?

It was Laurence who went shopping for various types of netting and wire that might make our balcony safe enough for Homer to go out onto. He'd observed the way Homer would stand longingly at the sliding glass door when Laurence and I occasionally let Scarlett and Vashti out (a years-long source of angst for me; I hated to deprive Scarlett and Vashti of time outdoors, but felt miserable that Homer had to be excluded). Sadly, there was no getting around the fact that our balcony railing was well within Homer's jumping range. "If only Homer couldn't jump so high," Laurence would say in a sympathetic tone that was, nevertheless, tinged with appreciation. "That cat can jump *so high*."

But Vashti remained first and foremost in Laurence's affections. "Hey, it's the Vashti cat!" he would cry happily whenever she entered a room—running straight over to leap into his lap and rub her little cheek daintily against his.

His favorite nickname for her—one entirely of his own invention—was "Vashowitz." She was almost always "the Vashowitz" when

he referred to her—as in, “Do you think the Vashowitz would like *this* brand of catnip?” or “I think we need to get the Vashowitz a new scratching post. She’s clawed right through the old one.”

From the way he fussed and fawned over her, you would think no man had ever fallen in love with a cat before.

One day, about a year after the cats and I had moved in, Laurence brought home a bag of Pounce cat treats. He was looking for a way to make Vashti happy, I think, but all three cats got their fair share.

They must lace those Pounce treats with crack, because I had never seen anything like the three-ring circus in our apartment whenever the bag of Pounces came out. Even Scarlett sat up on her hind legs like a meerkat and begged. *Scarlett begged!* She still wouldn’t let Laurence touch her, flinching away if his hand sought her head, but she went so far as to purr and rub against his ankles when he came home at night.

Laurence also learned to lightly tap the ground with his fingernail next to the Pounces he dropped for Homer, so that Homer would know where they were. Homer was soon constantly crawling all over Laurence, nosing into his hands and pockets with friendly curiosity. *Hey, buddy! Got any of those Pounce treats?*

And Vashti ... well, Vashti also loved the Pounces, but she had always loved Laurence for himself. That didn’t change much.

LAURENCE WAS THE kind of person who never simply handed anybody a birthday card. He always sent them by mail because, he said, it was infinitely more fun to find a birthday card unexpectedly in your mailbox than it was to see it in somebody’s hand.

The first birthday I celebrated nearly a year after moving in with Laurence, I got two birthday cards in the mail. One was from Laurence himself, and bore the return address of his office. The second had a return address and handwriting I didn’t recognize (I would later find out that Laurence had gotten a co-worker to address it). When I opened the envelope, I saw a card with three

kittens—who looked a great deal like Scarlett had looked as a kitten—on the front. Inside the card, I read:

Happy birthday, Mommy! We love you, even though you make us live with that horrible man.

It was signed “Scarlett, Vashti, & Homer.” Scarlett’s “signature” was in red ink, naturally, while Vashti’s bore a small drawing of a paw print beside it. The “R” in Homer’s was backward and his whole name trailed halfway off the page. Laurence would later explain that, of *course* Homer’s signature wasn’t perfect—the cat was *blind*, for crying out loud.

Three weeks later, Laurence asked me to marry him. I said yes.

IT WOULD BE almost two years before Laurence and I were married. The novel I had written was sold for publication, and even though I was no longer working at my full-time job there were months of edits to be done, followed by even more months of promotion, interviews, and travel. Trying to plan a wedding in the middle of all that would have been too stressful to think about. So we waited a year, until after the book came out, before we began making arrangements. It was just short of another year from the time we started planning until the wedding day itself.

A few months before we were married, Laurence’s best man, Dave, came over for lunch. Dave had known Laurence since nursery school and had, naturally, spent a great deal of time in our apartment. But he was usually here with other people. Scarlett and Vashti were shy of any crowd larger than three or four, so the only one of the cats Dave had met was Homer.

Homer remembered Dave and greeted him in his usual friendly, high-energy fashion. *Hi there! Wanna throw the stuffed worm for me?* Scarlett was also out and, curiously, didn’t run away to hide. I was across the room when I saw that Dave was going to try to pet her. I yelled, “No—don’t!” but it was too late. Dave’s hand was already on her head.

I prepared myself for the worst, mentally assessing whether we had any Band-Aids left in the medicine chest, when I saw something I never thought I'd live to see. Scarlett was nuzzling her head affectionately against Dave's hand. Laurence and I looked at each other, and then at Scarlett, as if she had broken out into a soliloquy from *Hamlet*.

Dave was unaware of our astonishment. He turned to Laurence and asked, "So which cat is the mean one?"



23 • Intimations of Immortality

No one was ever yet so fortunate as you have been, nor ever
will be, for you have been adored by us all.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

SEVEN WEEKS BEFORE THE WEDDING, HOMER STOPPED EATING.

Within the past few months, I had taken the cats off dry food completely as it became clear that Vashti's sensitive digestive system—which had only become more sensitive with age—could no longer handle it. All three cats had responded to their new moist-food-only regimen with enthusiasm—particularly Homer, who had always been fonder of “human-food” meats than the other two.

I wasn't initially alarmed that first morning when Homer, rather than muscling past the other cats to get to his food bowl the way he usually did, approached the bowl halfheartedly and sniffed at it a few times before ambling off. It wasn't his typical behavior, but more than a decade of being a “cat mom” had taught me not to be an alarmist about such things. It might be that he was tired of that specific flavor. While Homer had never been a finicky cat, he was getting on in years (it was so hard to believe he was eleven already!), and I knew it wasn't unheard of for a cat to become

finickier as he grew older. Or maybe he simply wasn't hungry. Where was the law that said a cat had to eat the exact same amount of the exact same food at the exact same time every day? I made a mental note to put down a different flavor in a few hours when I gave them their midday feeding, then went about reviewing proposals and price quotes from lighting designers for the wedding.

When I put down food again a little after one o'clock, this time making sure I selected a different variety from what I had given them that morning, Homer once again refused to eat. He walked into the room somewhat sluggishly, sniffed the food as he had that morning, and made digging motions around the bowl, the way he did when burying something in the litter box.

I wondered if there might be something wrong with the food. Not too long ago, there had been a major scare among pet owners when a substance toxic to cats and dogs made its way into several popular brands. It hadn't affected us directly—Vashti's allergies and colitis having long since required me to buy specialty brands—but who was to say that this batch of food hadn't been tainted with salmonella or *E. coli*? Homer's sense of smell was so much more acute than the other two's, and the way he was acting seemed to indicate that something didn't smell right to him. Perhaps he'd detected a hazard that wasn't apparent to Scarlett and Vashti.

I took all three ceramic bowls away (over Vashti's ardent squeaks of protest), emptied them out, scrubbed them vigorously, and ran them through the dishwasher twice. While they were cleaning, I dashed out to the pet store two blocks away and selected several cans of Newman's Own organic cat food. It was pricier than I would have liked (*Hey, it's for charity!* I told myself), but I couldn't remember any negative stories or health scares associated with the Newman's Own line.

The food was new and the bowls were as sterile as they were ever going to be. To be completely safe, however, I pulled out three small dishes from the set Laurence and I used ourselves, arranged the Newman's Own food on them, and put everything down for the cats.

This time, Homer didn't even bother going into the room where the food was. He sat on his haunches in the middle of the hall as the other two cats charged past him, and then, after a minute or two of apparent deliberation, shuffled like an old man in the opposite direction to curl up in a patch of sunlight on the living room rug, carefully wrapping his front paws around his face.

I was still determined not to panic, but by now I was definitely concerned. I realized that I hadn't seen Homer scamper around playfully once all day. The only things he'd done since that morning were wander up and down the hall a couple of times and sleep. His lack of energy could be explained by the fact that he hadn't eaten—I wasn't very high-energy myself when forced to skip meals—but that, of course, begged the question: Why wasn't he eating?

As a last resort, I ran out once more—this time to the bodega across the street—and purchased a box of dry food. Maybe, enthusiastic as he'd always been about it, Homer had developed a sudden revulsion to moist food altogether. I was the kind of person who could eat the same thing for breakfast every day for two years straight, and then one morning feel as if I couldn't eat that breakfast again, ever, even if it meant I wouldn't eat anything at all. It seemed entirely reasonable that Homer might be experiencing a similar feeling. Since Homer hadn't eaten all day, I bought a box of Kitten Chow, thinking it might go down easier than one of the adult formulas.

I locked Scarlett and Vashti in the far bedroom, so Homer could eat in peace. Then I poured some of the dry food onto a small plate, sat next to Homer on the rug, and stroked his back. "Come on, kitty," I coaxed, "make your mother happy and eat a little something."

Rising unsteadily to his feet, Homer lowered his head and began to nibble at the dry food. He didn't eat with much enthusiasm, but he did eat. It was only as I watched him swallow his first tiny mouthful and go for a second one that I knew how worried I had been. If Homer truly couldn't stand moist food anymore, and Vashti was unable to eat any dry food, then feeding times were about to

become a nightmare of complications in our home. Nevertheless, I was so thrilled to see Homer eat that this scenario struck me as more comic than cumbersome. *Cats!* I thought. *Leave it to a cat to assume my life revolves around his food preferences.* I was laughing as I said to Homer, in a mock-scolding voice, “Silly cat! You had me so scared!” I gave him a small bowl of water and, after he’d lapped at it for a moment, I took the food and water away. I didn’t want him to pile too much into an empty stomach and wind up vomiting.

After I covered up the food and water and stowed them in the refrigerator, I released the other two cats and settled on the couch. Homer crept after me, moving his joints in a slow and deliberate fashion, and halfheartedly rubbed the top of his head against my chin before curling up in my lap. He purred, but his purr was feeble. “Poor thing,” I said to Laurence, when he got home that night. “His tummy’s been upset all day.”

Homer didn’t move much the rest of the night, but whenever he seemed even half awake, I rushed to the refrigerator to pull out the bowls of water and dry food. He didn’t eat or drink with as much relish as I would have liked, but he consumed enough to alleviate the worst of my fears. It seemed that whatever had been troubling him was already working itself out of his system.

“You’re so good with him,” Laurence said. His expression was uncharacteristically soft. It was the same look he occasionally wore if, for example, we went to visit friends who’d just had a baby and I held the newborn in my arms. Laurence would lean in to kiss my cheek as I cradled the infant and murmur, *You look good like that.*

“I love him,” I told Laurence. “If I’m good with him, it’s because I love him.”

I went to sleep before Laurence did that night and asked him to keep an eye on Homer. When Laurence came to bed a few hours later, I sat up groggily and asked how Homer was doing. “I gave him a little more of the dry food when the other two weren’t looking,” Laurence said. “He seemed fine. I think he’s sleeping in one of the closets now.”

Sleeping in a closet? Homer never slept in closets. Scarlett and Vashti sometimes liked to burrow deep into a closet and doze where nobody could find them, but Homer always wanted to sleep in the vicinity of at least one other person or cat. I felt a small pang of alarm as Laurence relayed this information, but Homer'd had a rough day. If he wanted to be alone for a while, that was understandable.

The following morning, Homer wouldn't eat anything at all—not even the dry food he'd eaten the night before. After Vashti and Scarlett had eaten, Homer left his small cave in the closet just long enough to stumble into the far bedroom. I didn't like the way he was walking. His steps were hesitant, and he bumped his head repeatedly into walls and furniture. I had never seen Homer like this before. He walked as if ...

As if he were blind, I thought grimly.

Homer staggered in this befuddled fashion into the bedroom, climbed slowly up the side of the bed, and balled himself up on one of the pillows. I sat down next to him and stroked his back. Homer had always—*always*—acknowledged my touch, had purred or leaned into my hand or raised his head so I could scratch beneath his chin. Now, though, he didn't stir. He didn't so much as twitch a muscle.

"Homer?" I said. No matter how deeply asleep he was, Homer would at least lazily flick one ear at the sound of his name. But this time he didn't respond at all. It was as if my Homer, the cat I'd known and loved so well for more than a decade, was trapped somewhere inside this shell of a cat who now lay beside me on the bed.

This was something beyond the vagaries of a bad day or a sour stomach. I immediately called my vet's office.

The vet was seeing other patients, and I was told that I should leave my phone number and he would call back. There was nothing for me to do in the meantime except pace the floors and wait for a return call—which I did, for the better part of the morning.

I couldn't begin to imagine what was responsible for this dramatic change in Homer's behavior. By lunchtime, when I'd called the vet again and still hadn't heard back, I decided to consult Google. I was sure there was some perfectly benign, nonalarmist way of accounting for Homer's malaise that the collective wisdom of the online community would reveal to me. So I sat in front of my computer and typed in the phrase, "cat stopped eating."

Here's a tip for the cat owners out there—and I want you to take this advice very seriously, because it's important. Should your own cat one day stop eating, do yourself a favor and *do not Google the phrase* "cat stopped eating." I mean it. You will be tempted to do so, but I'm here to tell you that you really, *really* don't want to, because *oh my good God*.

The list of maladies to which this particular symptom corresponded was as long as it was terrifying: kidney failure, liver failure, stomach cancer, colon cancer, feline leukemia, pneumonia, tumors, brain tumors, a stroke that had already happened, a stroke that was about to happen, and on and on and on. The only innocuous illness—tooth infection or gum disease—was also the only one I could rule out on my own. Homer had eaten the crunchier dry food the night before when he wouldn't eat the softer moist food, plus I couldn't find any abscesses or signs of infection inside his mouth. That Homer allowed me to poke around inside his mouth without struggling impatiently was, in itself, corroboration that something more than a tooth infection was at work here.

Somewhere around page three of the Google search results, when I reached the stories of people whose cats had stopped eating one day and then fallen over dead the next, sanity and I parted company. I called the vet's office again, and this time I demanded to speak with him. "I am not hanging up the phone until I do," I informed the receptionist, my voice choked with panic. "I don't care how long I have to hold."

I was being something of a difficult client, but the veterinarian did come to the phone after only a few minutes and asked his questions patiently. I tried to answer with equal calmness and

clarity. No, I hadn't noticed any bloody stool or urine. No, neither of the other cats was displaying any unusual symptoms or behavior. Yes, it had seemed to come on very suddenly—Homer had been rambunctious as a kitten only two days earlier. I knew he had eaten and drunk a little something the night before, but he definitely hadn't eaten and I wasn't sure if he'd drunk today.

The last thing the vet asked was for me to pinch the skin of Homer's neck just above his shoulder blades. I administered this strange-sounding test and reported that the skin had sunk almost immediately back into its normal position, albeit not with much elasticity. "That means he's not too dehydrated yet," the vet said. "If the skin hadn't gone back down, I would have told you to bring him in now so we could get an IV fluid drip going. He should be okay for today, but I want you to bring him in first thing tomorrow morning. A cat who goes too long without eating can sustain liver damage."

Laurence returned home from work with sliced turkey, cans of tuna, smoked salmon—all of Homer's favorites. But Homer was equally indifferent to everything. The sound of the turkey being unwrapped or the can of tuna being opened didn't bring the familiar *clip-clip-clip* of footsteps down the hall. Scarlett and Vashti followed me eagerly into the third bedroom, anxious for their share of the goodies. Scarlett clambered onto the bed and eyed Homer suspiciously as she nosed after the food in my hand that Homer hadn't even lifted his head to examine. *Aren't you going to bother me?* she seemed to ask. *Is this some kind of a trick?* Homer had always pursued turkey and tuna with an aggressiveness that Scarlett found distasteful, shamelessly pushing the other cats out of the way in his excitement.

But Homer remained perfectly still. If it hadn't been for the slight rise and fall of his breathing, I wouldn't have known he was alive.

I slept with Homer in the third bedroom that night—although *slept* may be the wrong word, because I was wide awake most of the time. I lay on my side and Homer nestled into my midsection as if he couldn't get warm enough, even though it was the middle of July. I rested my cheek on top of his head and wrapped my arms

around him, whispering, “You’ll be fine, little boy. You’ll see. The doctor will make you all better tomorrow.”

Homer didn’t fight me early the next morning as I loaded him into his carrier, although I would have given anything if he had. He’d always been a small cat, but today he looked frighteningly skinny. I could feel the bones of his spine poking through his skin as I lifted him into the carrier. For the first time, I found myself almost grateful that Homer didn’t have eyes; I didn’t think I could have borne the look of mute suffering that surely would have been in them. “Good boy,” I murmured as I zipped the carrier closed around him. I continued talking to him in a soft, reassuring voice in the cab to the vet’s office. “Good kitty. Good boy.”

The vet and I had a minor disagreement once we were in the exam room. He wanted me to wait in the waiting room while he examined Homer, and I had no intention of leaving. If it had been Scarlett or Vashti I might have, but Homer—ill and miserable as he clearly was—would be terrified if left alone in a strange place with strange people. He wouldn’t be able to see their faces or make any sense of what was happening to him. He wouldn’t understand why I had abandoned him. I couldn’t leave him; if anybody was going to hold Homer down while the vet performed his tests, it would be me.

Homer had been alarmingly listless for the past two days, but he sparked briefly back to life on the exam table. He had never exactly been a good patient (what pet enjoys the vet’s office?), but I’d never—not even during the break-in—heard him growl and hiss as evilly as he did that day while the vet turned him this way and that, poking with his fingers and various instruments as he collected samples and felt for lumps, tears, or obstructions. I stood at the opposite end of the exam table from the vet, my hands firmly clenched in the scruff of Homer’s neck as I tried to hold him still. “Good boy,” I crooned, my thumbs rubbing behind his ears. I felt that I should keep talking, that if anything would calm Homer, it was the sound of my voice. “You’re my brave little boy and you’re doing such a good job. Mommy is right here with you, and this will all be over soon.”

The vet announced that he was going to collect a urine sample. I was wondering how he would accomplish this—it wasn't as if he could tell Homer to pee in a cup, was it?—when I noted the giant needle he was preparing and saw his movement to turn Homer onto his back. The idea, it would seem, was to insert that long needle directly into Homer's bladder.

Homer resisted being turned onto his back with all his might—and the amount of force he was able to command was startling, considering that he hadn't eaten in two days and was now closer to weighing two pounds than three. When the vet attempted to insert the needle, Homer screamed.

I don't mean that Homer yowled or yelped or growled—I mean that he screamed. It's a sound I still hear sometimes in bad dreams, a scream of pain and fear that was almost human. The vet was trying to say something to me, but I couldn't hear him. The only thing I could hear was the sound of Homer screaming. One of his front paws rose in the air and he clawed violently at me—at me—missing my right cheek by only a few inches.

My face must have looked as pale and horrified as I felt, because the vet said firmly, "I'm going to take him into another room and get some of our techs to help me. You should wait in the waiting room." Then, more gently, he added, "Try not to worry too much. We won't hurt him." He bundled Homer into his carrier and exited, leaving me alone.

When I was growing up, we'd had a dog named Penny, a German shepherd who was exceedingly gentle and was, as we always said, my father's dog. Penny loved my father, adored him, followed him everywhere with worshipful eyes and would have lived and died only to make him happy. Late in life she'd developed hip dysplasia, as large breeds often do, and my father for two years had patiently helped lift her to her feet when she struggled to get up, had cleaned up after her when she lost control of her bowels. Then one day, as my father tried to help her stand, Penny turned around and snapped at his hand. She was immediately contrite, whimpering and licking

his hand in a desperate plea for forgiveness, which was of course immediately granted.

But my father, when he told this story, always said that that's when he knew. He took her to the vet that afternoon, and Penny never came home again.

It was Penny who had flashed through my mind when I'd seen Homer's claws—after so many years of unwavering love and loyalty—slash at me. I felt a sudden helplessness. For the first time since I'd brought him home with me, there was nothing I could do for Homer. I was standing alone in that room, Homer having been taken away because there was nothing I could do to help him. Even after September 11, there had been something I could *do*, a plan of action I could follow. Homer had always needed me in ways that my other two cats, fiercely as I loved them, had not. I'd promised that I would never let anything bad happen to him, had done everything I could over the years to keep that promise, yet ultimately I had failed. Such a promise, I knew in that moment, was by its nature impossible to keep. You could love someone, you could try to protect them from everything you could think of, but you couldn't keep life from happening to them. And with that realization came the knowledge of pain, of the pain Homer was in now and the pain that would come, of hard decisions I might have to make sooner than I was prepared for.

My cats were getting old—were, by the standards of some, old already. Homer was eleven and would soon be twelve. Vashti was thirteen and Scarlett was fourteen. I was on the brink of getting married, and Laurence and I loved to talk about our future, about what we might be doing five or ten years from now. My thoughts of the future always, unconsciously, included my cats. I simply couldn't imagine my life without them. They had come to define and shape almost all of the adult life I had known. It was only yesterday, or so it seemed, that they had come to me as kittens, barely old enough to be weaned from their mothers.

But they were getting old. In that moment I understood that I would marry Laurence in a few weeks and start a life with him, but

very little of the life we would live together would include all three of my cats.

Soon enough, it wouldn't include any of them.

I walked out, through the waiting room and the front door of the building to the street outside. I pulled my cell phone from my purse and called Laurence at his office. I'd meant to assume a "brave-but-shaken" tone, to tell him that I didn't know anything yet but had wanted the reassurance of speaking with him. As soon as I heard his voice on the other end of the line, though, I began to cry.

"I'm coming down there," Laurence said. I tried to pull myself together and tell him that wasn't necessary, that I would be okay. But Laurence said quietly, "Gwen, he's my cat, too."

The vet released Homer to Laurence and me half an hour later, with a promise to call within twenty-four hours when he got back the test results. "What should we do in the meantime?" Laurence asked, and the vet responded, "Try to get him to drink some water. And if he shows any interest in eating, let him eat as much as he wants of whatever he wants."

Laurence dropped us off at home and returned to his office. I sat with Homer all day; he crept out of his carrier and, exhausted from his grueling morning, fell asleep on the floor a few inches away from it. Later that afternoon, I wrapped him in an old blanket and brought him out onto the balcony so he could sleep in the sun. It had always been Homer's fondest wish to go out on that balcony, like Scarlett and Vashti sometimes did, and I'd never let him, feeling that he tended to move so quickly, it would be impossible to keep him safe.

I didn't think there was much chance he'd dart away from me today, though.

Homer seemed completely unaware of the distinction between inside and outside. He didn't even sniff the air or flicker an ear to capture the sounds and smells he'd always been so curious to explore. "*Eres mucho gato*, Homer," I murmured, sitting beside him and stroking his head. "*Eres mucho, mucho gato.*"

The phone didn't stop ringing all day. My parents called every few hours to see if there was any word from the vet, as did Laurence. Laurence must have spread the word that Homer wasn't well, because his parents and sister also called, as did many of our friends—even our friends who weren't "pet people," who'd never had pets of their own, and who I wouldn't have expected to empathize with a pet's illness. But it had always been that way with Homer; to have met him even once was to interest yourself in his welfare. As the number of callers swelled, it was clear how important it was to many—and not just to me—that this scrappy little Daredevil, this small cat who'd made a heroic and extraordinary act out of living an ordinary life, pull yet another life from the nine he'd been burning through since he was a blind, half-starved two-week-old a hairbreadth away from an inglorious end in a shelter.

Call me, they all insisted. Call me as soon as you hear from the vet.

The vet never was able to determine what, precisely, had made Homer so ill. When the tests came back, the only thing he could say was that there had, indeed, been some minor damage to Homer's liver—which could have been the cause of his illness, but could also have been one of its effects. The vet asked me to keep him apprised and to bring Homer back for a follow-up visit in a week, which I did. Homer received a clean bill of health.

And, in a sense, Homer recovered fully. By the next day he was up and around a bit, eating sparingly and halfheartedly batting around a crumpled-up ball of paper. Within three days, he had resumed his usual eating habits.

Homer still scampers and darts joyfully through our home, but not so often as he used to, and not with the same ease. He moves with a certain stiffness to his joints, and I've begun adding a supplement to their food that helps promote joint flexibility in senior cats. He sleeps more often and more deeply than he did of old, and if awakened unexpectedly he can be downright cranky. He still loves to doze near Scarlett and Vashti, but sometimes he hisses at them when they accidentally disturb his rest—Homer, who never hissed, except when there was danger. His coat had been as purely

black as a piece of polished onyx, but now it's flecked with gray, and a single whisker grew in a conspicuous shade of silver. He never regained all the weight he lost, and Laurence and I joke that he has the hipbones of a supermodel, but it isn't a joke that either of us finds especially funny.

Perhaps the most visible change of all is that Homer no longer plays with his stuffed worm. It sits discarded and bedraggled—it's as old as Scarlett, after all—in a corner of our apartment. From time to time I pull it out and try to reintroduce Homer to his former best friend, but it's as if he decided one day that the stuffed worm belonged to a different era. The era of his youth.

Yet not even the onset of old age can completely defeat Homer's irrepressible high spirits. He still scraps tooth and claw for a stolen morsel of turkey when Laurence makes a sandwich. He still hasn't given up on his life's dream of successfully trouncing Scarlett—always “sneaking” up on her from the front, in plain sight. The two of them play this game with less speed, perhaps, but with equal vigor, and the look on Scarlett's face seems to say, *Aren't we getting too old for this?* He spends entire days following the path of the sun across our living room rug, purring happily in the warmth of the light he's never seen.

Most of all, what remains the same is Homer's overwhelming joy in the morning when I get out of bed and his day begins. He still spends a good ten minutes rubbing his face vigorously against mine, still purrs with as much singsong richness as he did that first morning, as a kitten, when he'd realized that both of us were still here.

With age, perhaps, Homer has realized—as Laurence himself is fond of saying—that any day spent above ground with your loved ones is a good day.



24 • Reader, I Married Him

May you whom I leave behind me give happiness to your families; may heaven vouchsafe you every good grace, and may no evil thing come upon your people.

—HOMER, *The Odyssey*

LAURENCE AND I WERE MARRIED IN SEPTEMBER, IN THE PENTHOUSE OF a funky downtown office building. It commanded sweeping views of the Manhattan skyline at night, befitting a groom as much in love with New York as Laurence was, and reflecting all the best in my own life since moving to New York with my cats nearly eight years earlier.

We decided to dispense with many of the formalities associated with weddings. Our guest list was kept scrupulously small (although there was a rather large Swedish contingency). I wore a vintage, 1940s-era cocktail dress, wide in the shoulders and narrow at the waist, rather than a formal wedding gown. There was plenty of dancing but no seating arrangements, no five-course dinner, no flower-draped aisle or even, for that matter, any aisle at all. We opted for a cocktail party—with passed hors d'oeuvres and lots of liquor—that happened to have a wedding ceremony in the middle. When the evening was about halfway through, we gathered our friends and families together, popped up a chuppah (the canopy under which Jewish wedding ceremonies are held), called the rabbi forward, and were married. The ring I gave to Laurence was inscribed with a passage from the Song of Songs: *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*,

which means, *I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine*. When we kissed for the first time as husband and wife at the ceremony's conclusion, Stevie Wonder's "Signed, Sealed, Delivered" played. Andrea and Steve, who had introduced us to each other, introduced us to the crowd as Mr. and Mrs. Lerman. Then the music and dancing resumed once more.

Laurence and I liked to speculate before the wedding as to the roles we would have assigned to the cats, if it had been even remotely feasible to have the three of them in attendance. We could press Vashti, with all the glory of her natural bridal white, into service as a ring bearer. And surely we could find important jobs for Homer and Scarlett. It was pure silliness, naturally, but still ... it felt odd to get married without the cats there. One way or another, they had influenced and participated in just about every momentous occasion in my life over the past fourteen years. If not for Homer, I might never have come to appreciate the value of a man like Laurence. I would have loved Laurence's warmth, humor, and quick mind no matter what, but I might never have understood that when you find someone whose essential character is so strong as to leave no room for doubt, you've found a rock that you can build your life on.

It's become trendy, in recent years, to talk about how much longer it takes people of my generation to grow up and think of ourselves as adults. But growing up doesn't necessarily mean getting married, having children, or taking out a mortgage. Growing up means learning to be responsible for others—and embracing the great joys those responsibilities can bring. Homer taught me that building my life around someone other than myself, making myself responsible for someone else's life, is one of the most rewarding differences between being a kid and being an adult.

Being the parent of a special-needs pet means living your life constantly poised on the edge of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, you become a fierce defender of the ways in which your little one is perfectly ordinary—all the things he or she can do that are just like what everybody else does. No need for any extra attention

here, thank you very much. And yet, you never lose sight of how absolutely extraordinary that very ordinariness is, how difficult, remarkable, and rewarding that fight to be “just like everybody else” has been.

Maybe Homer isn’t really any more extraordinary than other cats. But among the small circle of people whose lives he’s touched, this tiny cat who nobody wanted—who nobody, with the exception of one young and idealistic veterinarian, believed could ever go on to live a good life—has been a source of minor miracles, major joy, and a concrete example of that best of all possible truths:

Nobody can tell you what your potential is.

Back before I adopted Homer I had believed, with the certainty of a child, that the way my life was then was the way it would always be—that the career, the relationships, and the life that I wanted would always be somewhere beyond my reach. Yet here I was—a published author, a bride about to be married to the single greatest man I had ever met. The one thing I knew for sure about our future was that it could be anything we wanted it to be.

Despite having forgone so many of the traditional wedding trappings, Laurence and I opted for a strictly traditional ceremony. The ceremony is the thing, after all, and we liked the idea of saying the same words, and having the same words said over us, that had been said by and for our grandparents and great-grandparents, and other brides and grooms for thousands of generations before us.

This meant that we didn’t write our own vows. Instead, we toasted each other once the ceremony was over. I spoke of Laurence’s astonishing wit and intelligence, his strength that I never believed possible I would find in anybody. “I laugh every single day,” I said. “And it is miraculous to me every single day that the greatest man I’ve ever known loves me, too.”

“Let me tell you a little something about Mrs. Lerman,” Laurence said, when it was his turn to toast me. He went on to speak about brains and beauty, about passion and compassion. “Gwen is the most passionate person I’ve ever met, and also the most logical,” he

said. “She’s passionate about being logical. I had no idea this was even possible.”

On the theme of combining passion and logic, I knew from years of event production that no matter how free flowing and spontaneous a party felt, it needed to have a strong logistical skeleton. So I carefully scripted everything out—lighting changes, the time for the ceremony, the schedule for toasts—in an Excel spreadsheet and sent it to all vendors and participants (including Andrea and Steve) several weeks ahead of time. I was mocked relentlessly for this, but I was firm in my belief that without a clear organizational flow, chaos would ensue.

Even though I had orchestrated everything down to the last detail, however, there was one surprise in store for me that night. After he concluded his toast, Laurence called forward Alex and Zachary, his eight- and five-year-old nephews, and Allison, the seven-year-old daughter of his first cousin. He retrieved three large, foam-core posters from some hidden corner I hadn’t noticed, and handed one to each of them. “I need some help for this part,” he told them. “Can you guys help me?”

They had obviously been prepped for this beforehand. Their faces nearly split beneath their wide grins of anticipation as they each eagerly took hold of one of the posters.

“There are three ‘people’ who couldn’t be here tonight,” Laurence said. “Technically, they weren’t invited. People who know me can’t believe I live with three cats. But I do, and it wouldn’t be a celebration of ours if they weren’t included. So it gives me great pleasure to introduce to you for the first time, in a very real and legally binding sense ... Vashti Cooper-Lerman!”

Allison held up her poster, and it contained an enormous photo of Vashti in midstride, looking adoringly out into the crowd as, no doubt, she had looked adoringly at the man holding the camera.

“Three things you need to know about Vashti,” Laurence said. “Number one, Vashti is beautiful. Number two, Vashti knows she’s

beautiful. Number three, Vashti knows that *you* know she's beautiful."

People laughed, although not nearly as hard as I did.

"Next," Laurence continued, "for the first time ever—legally and officially ... Scarlett Cooper-Lerman!"

Alex held up the poster of Scarlett. In her photo, Scarlett was lying on her side, her head raised as she gazed rather majestically into the middle distance.

"I've lived with this cat for three years," Laurence said, "and last week she let me touch her for the first time."

Poor Scarlett! Always fated to be misunderstood.

"And, last but not least, the star of the family, our Daredevil and truly the coolest cat in town ... Homer Cooper-Lerman!"

Zachary held up a poster-sized photo of Homer sniffing inquisitively at the camera lens. "And he's blind!" Zachary announced with great pride. "He's blind but he can walk around and everything!"

The crowd chuckled appreciatively as they clapped and cheered. It was Homer's first official standing ovation.

"This is a cat who knows how to *live*," Laurence said. "He's got this huge world in that little head, and you can tell just by looking at him that every second of every day of his life is an adventure. I only wish," he concluded, "that I could see what that cat hears."

It was the first time I had heard Homer described by somebody else, the first time that I wasn't the one who explained him or answered questions about him. But if anybody had asked me that night, *What do you mean he has no eyes? How does he get around? How can a cat live with no eyes?* my answer would have been different, and infinitely simpler, than the stock answers I usually gave.

I am Homer's eyes. And he is my heart. And finally, the two of us—Homer and I—had found another person whose own heart was big enough to carry us all.

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GWEN COOPER is the author of the novel *Diary of a South Beach Party Girl*. A Miami native, she spent five years working in nonprofit administration, marketing, and fundraising. She coordinated volunteer activities on behalf of organizations including Pet Rescue, the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, the Miami Rescue Mission, and His House Children's Home, and she initiated Reading Pen Pals, an elementary-school-based literacy program in Miami's Little Haiti. Gwen currently lives in Manhattan with her husband, Laurence. She also lives with her three perfect cats—Scarlett, Vashti, and Homer—who aren't impressed with any of it.

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Homer's Odyssey is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed.

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